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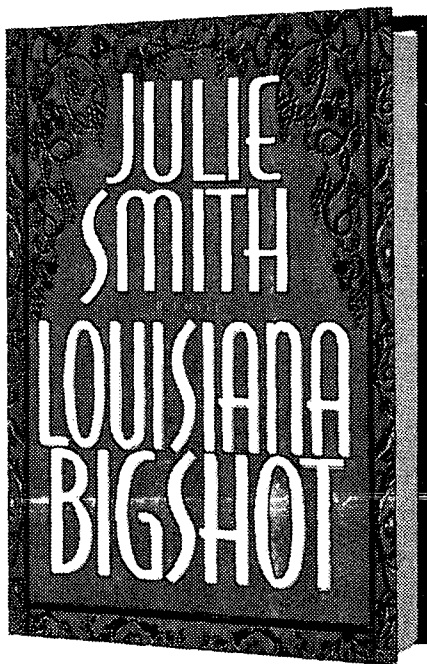
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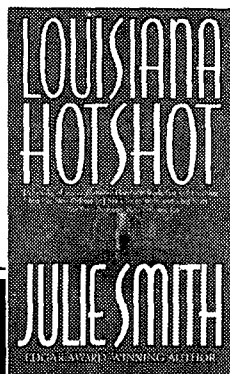
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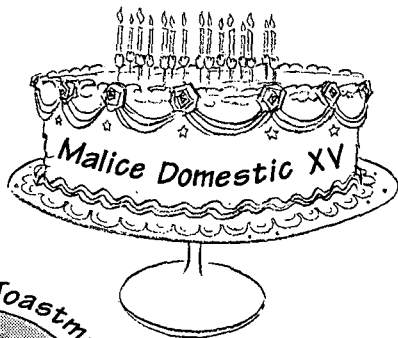
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Linda Landrigan

Will we ever cease to be obsessed by the mystery of family? This month, Herbie Sawyer, in D. A. McGuire's fine series that tracks the life of a teenage sleuth on Cape Cod, is learning to cope with his mother's deepening depression; in "Death Kid," his mother occupies his thoughts as much as the possibility of a serial killer in their midst. Bram Geary, a Depression-era reporter from Akron, learns the length a father will go to protect his daughter in Dick Stodghill's "Switchback." Baroness Orczy's Old Man in the Corner revisits an unsolved murder that is connected to two brothers' struggle over an inheritance in "The Dublin Mystery."

New to the AHMM family is Catherine Mambretti, author of "Painter of the Seven-Eyed Beast." This story marks the first

appearance of the canny fresco artist Ramón and his capable assistant Ermessenda. Says Ms. Mambretti: "My interest in Romanesque art and artists was sparked by a recent trip to Barcelona. The frescoes made me think that the artists must have been torn between what they observed with their own eyes and what they were taught to see in their mind's eye by tradition and the Church. The conflict was perfect for a mystery."

I am pleased to tell you that Ceri Jordan's "Rough Justice" (July/August 2001) has been nominated for a Shamus Award. The Shamus awards recognize excellence in the private eye genre and are given by the Private Eye Writers of America. The winners will be announced during the 33rd Bouchercon World Mystery Convention.

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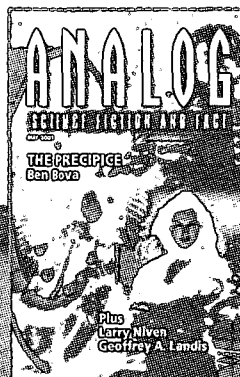
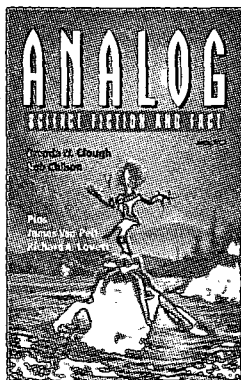
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Speed Up the Ducks

Rob Kantner

Illustration by M. K. Parker

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/02

The thunderstorm roared in from the Great Plains and rolled over Chicago like a sumo wrestler. Lightning bolts slashed the black skies in contrapuntal time with the bass booming of thunder that reverberated off the skyscrapers of the Loop. Traffic slowed on the Dan Ryan, crept out the Kennedy, and steamed on the O'Hare Connector, where nothing drove but the rain. The airport sprawled paralyzed, visibility measured in feet. People sheltered beneath viaducts that kettle-drummed under the downpour. Inside the PacLantic Airways terminal, rain-coated crowds dripped motionless. Some stared dumbly at monitors blinking CANCELED or DELAYED. Other hundreds herded between rubber ropes to wait, wait, and wait some more, in muttering, resentful lines labeled SEAT SELECTION, PURCHASE TICKETS, and FIRST CLASS.

There Glae stood, hot in her raincoat, cell phone glued to her ear. She was fifth back, on perpetual hold with Lake Central Air, and not the happiest of campers. We need you in Chicago, Glae, she remembered Dodd saying. It's just a hop over and back, he had added. You'll be home by bedtime easy, he had pressed. But now here she was, stuck.

"Ma'am?" crackled the voice in her ear.

"Yes?" Glae stooped, trying to tune out the terminal din.

"I can wait-list you on 2756," came the voice. "But you're twenty-fifth in line. And frankly, it's sure to cancel any minute. The weather in Detroit is as bad as it is here."

"What are my options?" Glae asked, trying not to sound anxious.

"I must get home tonight. Without fail."

"Stick with PacLantic," came the voice. "It's the only option."

Glae looked at the monitor. "But even if it flies, I won't get home till—"

"Sorry we can't help. Thank you for calling Lake Central."

Glae clicked her phone shut and tucked it into her purse. At her feet sat, dripping, her umbrella and briefcase. Nothing in there but papers, she reflected. Not even a toothbrush. It was bad enough to spend tonight dozing in an airport chair, without clean clothes, but it was worse, far worse, to break Brittany's heart.

"Wow, what a mess out there!" gasped the man who hustled into line behind her. Out of breath, he shed rainwater as he set his overnight bag and laptop case on the floor. "What's happening?" he asked, straightening.

"Nothing much," Glae said. "This line hasn't moved in twenty minutes." She looked at him. "Besides PacLantic, who flies to Detroit from here, do you know?"

The man looked down at her from his greater height. Unlike most males, his gaze went first to her eyes. "Um, Lake Central?"

"Tried them."

He shook his head. "Nobody else, far as I know," he said easily. "You're going to Detroit?"

"In theory," Glae said. "But my flight's delayed till eleven thirty. Everything else has been canceled."

"This one will probably cancel too," the man said. He was thirtyish, clean shaven, wearing a dark overcoat and good shoes. "It's horrendous out there; I'm surprised anything is moving. Took me three hours to get here from Lincoln Park."

"Well," Glae said determinedly, "I'm going home tonight, without fail."

"I hope to," he said, checking his watch.

"You're from Detroit?"

"Yeah," he said vaguely, staring up at the monitor.

The line shuffled forward one place. Glae scooted her case along with her foot. Her daughter's face came to mind. Dark, angry, that toss of her head, a door slam. "I wasn't even supposed to *be* here today," she said. "My boss arm-twisted me at the last minute to cover for somebody else."

"And you thought you'd just run over here and back today," the man said sympathetically.

"Right."

"So," the man asked, "why the rush to get back?"

She glanced at him. He had a round open face, professionally friendly eyes, confident if perhaps a bit self-impressed smile, a sort of shambling every-guy posture. She sized him up as a man for whom a business suit was an occasional inconvenience. Younger than her by a dozen years, and no parent, she was sure. In any other context his question might have struck her as impertinent. But at times like this, veteran business travelers observe an unspoken code. Often without naming names, they share information, personal details, confidences—some of them startling. In that light, Glae found his question to be downright mundane. "Tomorrow—eighteen hours from now—we're having a graduation open house for my daughter. We've been planning it for months. Ninety people coming, musicians, caterer. I've got to be home first thing to supervise."

"Hmm," he toned sympathetically. "Would not do to annoy the resident teenager, eh?"

There was, of course, much more to it than that. Brittany had had her share of rough times, and had given her parents their fair share of heartaches. But since junior year she had "walked chalk," as Marshall put it, and her reward was this all-out graduation bash. Plus the Miata. "Would not do," Glae agreed, forcing a smile. "And you? Why the rush to get back?"

"Oh, I've got a big meeting tomorrow first thing. It's no big deal, just my job at stake, la di da."

"Yeah, who cares about *that*?" she said. "Aside from your credit card firms, and landlord—"

"And the auto leasing company, and utilities, and my bookie," he added, joining her laughter. They shuffled forward one more place. "You know," he said presently, "I might just look into renting a car for the run home."

She squinted at him. "One-way rental they hit you with a whopping drop-off charge," she pointed out. "And who knows if cars are even available."

"But it's only a five, six hour drive," he said, getting out his cell phone. "I could be home by one, two A.M."

Glae got her phone out too. Punched a speed dial, spoke, waited, watching the man behind her in line, who was doing the same. Their eyes met. He said: "National has one. Ninety for the rental plus three hundred drop-off."

She smiled. "Deals-on-Wheels can do it for sixty, and a hundred drop-off. I'm near Ann Arbor; is that—"

"Perfect." He clicked his phone shut. "Split it with me?"

"You'll do the driving?"

"Delighted."

She spoke briefly into the phone, then hung up. "It's ours," she told him. "Let's go."

That was Glae. Lightning-quick. When you have a problem, you line up resources and you fix it. Not for her the seemingly endless hand-wringing, cogitating, soul-searching, and (God help us) "bench marking" of the Dodds and the Marshalls of the world. What the two men in her life called thoughtful analysis and measured decision making, Glae termed mental paralysis and maddening inertia. Top-heavy with brains, overburdened with education, addicted to discussion-for-its-own-sake, and (worst of all, in Glae's humble opinion) afraid to make mistakes, both her boss and husband seemed terminally unable simply to get on with anything.

In her spot, Dodd would still be back there at the PacLantic counter, tediously exploring every option with the utterly indifferent ticket agent. Marshall, with his penchant for "teamwork" and "consensus," would call his long-suffering travel agent at her home and insist that she solve the problem from there. Instead, Glae now stepped briskly off the rental car shuttle into the drizzle of the off-airport parking lot, Dodge Stratus keys in hand. Trailing her, Mike went to the trunk as the shuttle bus huffed away. "I'll load up," he said. "You get in out of the rain."

"Thanks." She gave him the keys, dropped her bag, and gratefully got into the passenger side. The thought of Marshall prompted her to check in. She hit his speed dial and waited, calculating the time

difference: He'd be just finishing the seminar now, chatting up the students, making dinner plans.

"Marshall Zbranchik," he answered.

"Well, you won't believe this," she began.

Mike loaded her case, then his, in the back seat.

"What's wrong?" Marshall asked.

"I'm *still* in Chicago."

Pause. "But you were supposed to—"

"I know. Storm hit, everything's grounded."

"You *know* you have to be back for—"

"Relax, Marshall. It's handled."

Mike tumbled wetly into the driver's seat and slammed his door.

"Handled how?" Marshall asked.

"Rented a car," Glae said. "I'll be home by one, two A.M. at the very latest."

"But you can't—"

"And I'm not. I'm sharing the ride. He's doing the driving."

"And who might this 'he' be?" Marshall asked, just as Mike started the engine.

"Another PaLaantic refugee. Mike—"

"English," he supplied, adjusting his seat.

"English," Glae repeated. "He's from Ann Arbor, too." She glanced at Mike as he turned up the heat. "What part of town?"

"University area, around in there," he said, warming the motor.

"Down on campus," Glae told her husband. "Anyway, we're splitting the cost, it won't be that much."

"The expense is the least of my concerns."

"What's the problem?" Glae asked as the car eased back.

"If I'm not mistaken," Marshall said, "you are about to embark on a six-hour drive, in the dark of night, from Chicago across the states of Indiana and Michigan, alone in the company of a man you have known—how long?"

Glae blinked. "Well. That's a point. Not that long."

"It's reckless, Glae," Marshall said. "What could you have been thinking about?"

"Look," she said, "I have to get home, you know that."

"You could have stayed over. Waited till morning. Taken the first plane out."

"And get there when? Noon? Way too late, Marshall."

"You could have called my sister," he went on in his scholarly tone, still very much in seminar mode. "She'd be glad to go to the house first thing and handle the open house arrangements for you."

"It's Friday night. 'Party' Marcie's night to howl. The sun will be long o'er the yardarm before she leans blurrily from her bed to puke into her shoes." That shut Marshall up, as Glae had known it would. She

felt a little bad about smacking him with that, but he had it coming. "How dare you second-guess my decisions?" she flared.

"You shouldn't have gone to Chicago today in the first place."

"Hey, bucko, I have my job to do, just like you."

"I'm not the one who left town on Friday morning, gambling that I could get back Friday night, with the open house impending!"

"That's right, you're not. You're the genius who booked a trip to San Diego for the week before Brittany's party, leaving me holding the bag."

"Glae—"

"You're the one who won't even be there for the party's start, because you're too good to take a red-eye home!"

"You know I can't sleep on airplanes," he grumped.

"Well, I can't sleep in airplane terminals," she retorted. "Especially knowing how much Brittany is counting on us to make tomorrow perfect for her. Correction. Counting on me."

"You? Remind me: Who's writing the check?"

"You know what? I'll see you at home."

"Wait." She put the phone back to her ear. "Call me," he said softly. "Every couple of hours. I want to know you're okay."

"I'll be fine," she insisted.

"Call me."

"All right," she said quietly. Slowly she put the phone back in her purse. The two thousand miles separating her from her husband seemed endless at that moment. Only then did she realize that the car had stopped. Mike had pulled them over by a row of parked buses and was staring out the window. "What's wrong?" Glae asked.

He looked at her, face in shadow. "I don't want this to be a problem for you."

"It's just Marshall," she said, with a lightness that even to her sounded forced. "He's upset with me for making this drive, all alone with a man I don't even know." Saying it herself, out loud and in the dark and alone with him, Glae felt newly uneasy. "Maybe I should—"

"Well," Mike said deliberately, "I don't want you worried. Or your husband, either. The car's yours. Drop me off here and go on home. I'll find some other way."

"I can't do that."

"It's okay, I can take care of myself."

"So can I. Drive."

Which he proceeded to do. Gladly. And with much anticipation.

Who could tell what opportunities the next few hours would bring? She was cute. A tad too old, a bit too thin—Chet liked them juicy and well nourished—but she was definitely an opportunity.

Which was Chet's hobby. Opportunity, and risk.

Of which there were many. She was no fool, he could tell. Fairly perceptive, he guessed. He had already told so many lies, he could hardly count them all. Starting with his destination for tonight, which had actually been Minneapolis, not Detroit! He knew little of Detroit. And of Ann Arbor he knew only that it was home to a big college—every football fan knew that. He had squeaked by. Just barely.

Beauty was, no one knew him in Ann Arbor.

His name was not on the rental car.

She had no idea who he was.

Or what he was thinking.

“So what do you do?” Glae asked.

“Who, me?” Mike replied. “Chicken sexer.”

They were on the Tri-State Tollway, eastbound now, nearing Indiana. Mike had seemed intent on taking the Dan Ryan straight through Chicago, but Glae directed him onto the tollway. Though longer, the route would be less congested, she thought. Wrong. It had been stop-and-go practically the whole way, as the interminable thunderstorm rumbled, jabbed lightning bolts, and hissed an almost continuous curtain of rain. Even with wipers on full, it was almost impossible to see more than fifty feet ahead. It looked like Glae was in for a very long night alone in the car with this . . . um . . . “Chicken sexer?” she echoed.

“Sure,” he said. “Haven’t you ever heard of a chicken sexer?”

“Afraid not.”

“I work in chicken hatcheries,” he said matter-of-factly. “Process newborn chicks. What I do is sort of pop their back end with thumb and forefinger—*bink!*—and get a quick peek inside. And—”

“TMI!” Glae said, parroting Brittany. “Too Much Information.”

“You asked,” he said airily. “Anyway, from the interior anatomy I determine if the chick is male or female. And I sort them. I have to be ninety-nine point five percent accurate. Very important.”

Dubious, Glae hummed. “That’s quite a skill to have.”

“It would be,” he said. “But guess what?”

“You’re making all that up?”

“Oh no, chicken sexers exist. I just don’t happen to be one of them. But it’s a heck of an ice breaker, isn’t it?”

“I can just picture you,” Glae said dryly, “using that in the bar to wow the girls.”

“Takes more than that to wow girls,” Mike said. “Takes a big fat wallet, is what it takes.” Glae might have taken issue with that, but Mike rolled right on. “And you do what for a living?”

“Teacher.”

“That’s great! What do you teach?”

“Business people.”

"I meant, what subject."

Glae sighed. "Quality function deployment."

"What, again?"

"QFD for short."

"BFD I've heard of."

"I'd explain QFD, but it's really boring."

"Humor me." She did, and it was. Without comment—without segue, even—he asked, "How do you spell your name?" She obliged. "It's very unusual. Really pretty." He glanced her way. "You've probably been told that."

"A time or two. But thanks." Sitting half-sideways, buckled in, as comfortable as she could be trapped in one place, Glae studied her companion's profile. In this pitch-blackness, broken strobeflike with the flash of headlights from hundreds of other vehicles refracted through rain-covered glass, Mike was a blurry monochrome figure. Even so, Glae sensed that he was younger than she had first thought. With, she had the feeling, more experience than years. Pushing aside that less-than-comfortable thought, she asked, "But seriously, Mike, what *is* your job?"

"Well, all right," he seemed to sigh. "Fact is, I'm a salesman."

Oh God. "That's great!" she said.

"In the printing game," he went on. "Longtimer, in fact."

Meaning, came the thought, you're particularly adept at two-way lying.

"Mainly a sheet-fed house," he said. "We're putting in some big webs now, and I'm developing customers for that end of the business."

Unwillingly, she translated: You lie to the customer about what your firm can do and lie to your own people about what the customer wants.

"Successful, then," she observed.

"Yeah, pretty much," he said. "It's all about relationships, you know."

Sizing people up, she mused.

"Getting to know people—"

Discerning their weaknesses.

"—meeting their needs—"

Picking the best pitch and then driving it home with a little bit of wheedle, some tap dancing, a dash of bullyboy, and a refusal to hear, let alone acknowledge, the word "no."

"—managing the relationships."

You buy from guys like this, Glae reflected, because that's the only way to get rid of them.

Mike went on talking. Something to do with travel, the vowel states, the large amount of windshield time he did. Glae listened with half her awareness. With the rest she took herself to task. Give him

a break, she thought. You don't really know him. Odds are he's an okay guy, a good guy. Sales is a profession, one that is honorable—that is, in fact, essential. No business could exist without it, in some form. As Marshall liked to say, nothing happens till someone sells something.

She couldn't believe she had reacted so negatively, her brain sending up all those negative flares. It just was not like her.

The Indiana line blipped by. The rain became, if anything, even more intense. The Dodge Stratus spent much time walled in the center lane between huge trucks, diesels drowning out the Stratus engine, the bottled-up rainfall a hurricane hell that pounded and drenched the car. Green exit signs flashed blurrily by, clicking off the miles. Glae took comfort in Mike's driving. He sat erect, hands on the wheel at ten till two, gaze fixed on the road, rigorously observing the speed limit. He seemed very cautious, very precise. And yet, Glae found herself unable to shake her vague, formless unease.

As he drove, Chet idly wondered what it would be like to be back in his old numb-ass print rep job. His current gig was so much better. And it practically minted money. After all, the world was full of suckers who needed cash. Many of them women: alone, unschooled, helpless, and afraid. In skilled hands, they practically fell all over themselves signing away gilt-edged assets in return for what appeared, through his artful array of prisms, mirrors, and smoke, to be something *ever* so much more lucrative. Chet's cut—which was paid *today*, thank you; none of this “deferred compensation” b.s.—was twenty percent, plus whatever extra he could get. And he never failed to get something out of everybody he met.

He could not wait to see what he'd get out of this one.

Another hour passed. So did the Michigan line. Time to check in with Marshall. Glae did so, briskly. He was at dinner and, from the sound of the distant laughter, having a good time. By now outside well over a half bottle of wine, she judged. She called home also and was relieved when Brittany answered. Safe at home, eager for her party. Apparently she had put on hold, at least for now, her teenaged eye-rolling scorn. Switching off her phone, Glae saw that the battery was nearly dead. She had a spare, but it was in her bag in the trunk. Damn.

“So what do you do for fun?” Mike asked abruptly. “Wait, I'll bet I can guess,” he charged on. “You're a runner, right? I mean, look at you. You're five-eight or five-nine, probably around one thirty, right?”

His accuracy was startling. And discomfiting. Was he that observant? And when had he had the chance to study her, anyway? A few minutes in the airport line. That was it. At the rental car counter he'd

wandered off while she did the paperwork. Since then, in the shuttle bus and here in the car, they'd been in the dark. Glae wrote it off as a lucky guess. But she certainly wasn't going to tell *him* that.

"Oh, I'm no runner," she said easily. "I'm just high energy, I guess. Intense. Vegetarian, too. I was vegan for a long time." Till Marshall, in a fit of uncharacteristic firmness, told her not to serve "underbrush and warm water" for dinner ever again. She'd complied and had even retreated from veganism. Still, Marshall liked to tell people that she never ate anything that cast a shadow. "I'm really not all that interesting," she said. "I work, I keep house, I visit friends, I take care of my daughter."

"Come on," he said, with just a tinge of slyness. "There must be *something* you do for fun."

"Well," she said carefully, "in terms of a hobby, to the extent that I have one, it's—competitive shooting."

"Really? Skeet?"

"Pistol." She debated with herself, then gave in. "I won the Olympic gold medal in '92."

"Pistol shooting's an Olympic event?"

"There are several, actually. Mine was twenty-five meter."

"Wow," he said readily. "That's pretty impressive. How did you get into shooting?"

Translation: How does a girl get involved in a man's pastime like firearms? Glae let it go. "Oh, when I was a teenager my dad bought a used video game system. It had a game called Duck Blind."

"I remember that," Mike said. "Cartoon ducks come flying out of bushes and you shoot at them with a fake pistol."

As opposed to a *real* pistol, Glae thought, amused. Now that would have been quite the parlor game. "Right. And I just—well, I had a talent for it, a knack. Born with perfect hand-eye coordination, I guess. I could just nail them. You could adjust the pace of the game, and I remember getting bored with the slow speeds. I'd yell at my dad, 'Speed up the ducks! Speed up the ducks!'"

"Did the ducks ever get fast enough for you?"

"No," she said, without thinking. The admission startled her. She had never thought about it, but it was true. Nothing—not the ducks, not anything else—had ever been fast enough. No matter the challenges life had thrown at her, she had overcome them briskly, figuratively dusted off her hands, and looked around for more. Sitting in this car, on this dark stormy night, Glae realized that she had spent most of her life watching the world, expectant, impatient, thinking as she waited: Where to? What next?

"Can I tell you what I do for fun?" Mike asked.

Glae squinted at him. Now, in rural western Michigan, the main light in the car came from the greenish glow of the dash lights. His

silhouette looked larger than before, his profile somehow older, more remote. "Sure," she said, with more willingness than she felt. "What would that be?"

"I break rules."

"Excuse me?"

He chuckled. "Nothing big. But all my life I've chafed at being fenced in. Bossed around. Regimented. So to take the edge off I break lots of little rules. Like right now: I'm going five over the limit. I sometimes sign checks Mickey Mouse—no one ever notices. Limit two ketchups, I swipe three. I never use zip plus five. At the grocery I take twelve items into a ten-item-limit express line. I tear tags off pillows and mattresses. I never sign the backs of credit cards."

"Interesting," Glae intoned, squinting.

"I even keep score," he went on. "Post 'em in a little notebook I carry. See how high a score I can rack in a day or a week." He shrugged. "Harmless, really. Keeps me off the street."

"Uh-huh," Glae replied, for something to say. She wondered how "harmless" this little hobby of Mike's really was. If he breaks lots of little rules, she reasoned, what's to stop him from breaking big ones? More to the point, why did he tell her this? Was it some sort of come-on? Or even a threat?

Down, girl, she told herself. Give him a break. He's just another big-talking boy-man, the type you've dealt with all your life. If he occasionally becomes grit in the gears of the social machinery, so what? The machinery is tough enough to withstand a legion of him.

And, she reasoned, so am I.

That, thought Chet, went over like a lead balloon.

It had been a total shot in the dark. In his dealings with women, he had learned that many carefully concealed beneath Glae's type of dutiful, proper, businesslike facade an explosively rebellious streak. Some never revealed it, even to themselves. Others did, but only under very rare, very particular conditions. Chet had gambled that Glae—if that really was her real given name, and Chet highly doubted it—might, just might, respond to his intimations with a hint of her own. Who knew where that could lead?

Instead what he got was the proverbial slam of the door, deafening and final.

Which meant that he would have to proceed to other, more direct measures.

Kalamazoo, Battle Creek, Albion. The Stratus tunneled gamely on its interstate trajectory through the torrential rain, guided steadily by Mike at seventy-two miles per hour. Glae's phone winked and died. She'd get the spare battery from her bag when they grabbed a rest

stop, which she would need before long. Mike had fallen mostly silent, a solid presence to Glae's left. They talked movies some and travel a little, a conversation of near misses and lengthy silences with scant common ground. Which was entirely okay by Glae. By now she was more than ready to put Mike English, and his episode of her life, behind her.

"So," came Mike out of his silence, "you're a married mom."

"Yes," she replied. "Marshall and I have been together twenty years. Brittany just turned seventeen."

"Seventeen going on thirty?"

Despite herself Glae laughed. "It sometimes appears that way." She found herself unwilling to let Mike further penetrate the veil surrounding her family relations. It somehow seemed unseemly. As diversion, she asked, "You sound experienced—do you have kids?"

"Oh hell no," he answered with a short laugh. "No, not me, no sirree." He evidently took Glae's silence, which arose from a lack of anything to say, as an invitation to elaborate. "I was married once, though. We didn't bring out the best in each other."

An unmitigated disaster, Glae speculated.

"Got married young. Too young."

All about sex, Glae interpreted.

"Before you know it, you're drifting apart. Too young to have the tools to fix things."

It was your way, Glae read, or the highway.

"And one day you wake up and realize it's just plain over. Once you've had that realization, the relationship is toast. All the rationalizing and counseling, et cetera, won't put Humpty back together again."

Besides, Glae figured, you'd found somebody else. Several somebodies. *Serial somebodies.*

HOLD IT, she told herself as Mike droned on, becoming mere background noise. What is with me? Why am I thinking this way? There is no basis for any of this! You, she lectured herself, are mapping this man to other things—other people, other situations. Some real, some sensed, some purely imagined. It's crazy.

All she could figure was that she'd had a very long day. There had been a lot of pressure and much stress, having to juggle the job and Marshall and Brittany all at once—

The car was slowing.

Through the flapping wipers Glae saw a green REST AREA arrow go by. Up ahead, where the ramp opened out, under blurry lights, were the truck and car lots and the rest area building. "Thought you could use a pit stop," Mike was saying. "I know I can."

He rolled the Stratus into a space close to the sidewalk leading to the brick building. The rain had let up some and now looked like oc-

casional silver streaks in the glow of the halogen overhead lights. Trucks brayed at high diesel idle in the truck lot. The car area teemed with wagons and vans and SUVs, glistening in the rain. Mike shut off the engine, relieving her ears. "Coming?" he asked.

"Give me the keys," Glae said. "I need to get a fresh battery out of my bag."

He handed them over, opened the door, and climbed out. "Oh, man!" he sighed, stretching, indifferent to the rain. "Feels good to un-pretzel. You coming, Glae?"

"Go ahead," she said, "I'll be right along."

She watched him close the door and walk somewhat stiffly toward the rest area building. Others were coming out, moving briskly toward their cars. Some were obvious tourists, others were clearly business people. Comparing Mike's looks, dress, and demeanor to theirs, Glae searched for clues, signs, portents, anything. She found none. And as she got out of the car, keys in hand, she thought about Brittany and Marshall. She thought about hitchhikers and interstate trucks and state police cars. And she continued a train of thought that was uncharacteristic for her. What should I do? What on earth should I do?

Of course Chet needed no bathroom. His purpose for stopping was the item he found, as expected, posted outside the men's room door. A Michigan map with inset-maps of Michigan towns, including Ann Arbor.

Studying it, he thought about his marriage. He was surprised at how truthful with Glae he'd been about it. Up to the last part, that is. He'd sort of left that out, that whole Last Part business. "The rest of the story," to quote Paul Harvey. Chet had not shared with Glae the fact of Cheri's Big Mistake. Her attempt, in the divorce action, to shake him down.

Yes indeed, Cheri had clearly thought the divorce would make her rich. It did not seem to be working out that way, though. The divorce was on indefinite hold, Cheri and her Internet lover being overdue for return from a backpacking trip to the Apostle Islands. About six months overdue . . .

Yes indeed. Cheri's Big Mistake.

In Chet's experience, every woman made a Big Mistake sooner or later.

Glae had already made hers.

Glae watched Mike saunter toward her from the rest area building. "Ready?" he asked.

"We need to talk," she said, handing him the keys. Once again, in a flash, she added things up, pro and con. This was so on-the-bubble, but she felt she should err on the side of—of what? Prudence? Safety?

Or paranoia? Silly goosey woman, she thought.

But still.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I think you should go on by yourself."

Mike's round, every-guy face was half illuminated in the street lamps. He squinted, honestly puzzled. "Why? What are you going to do?"

"I'll catch another ride," she said, gesturing around indifferently at other vehicles. "Or I'll call a cab or something, I don't know. I'll handle it. You just go on."

"Did I do something to upset you?"

So he was not simply going to be dismissed. She might have expected that; he was a salesman. "I'm just not comfortable, Mike. Let's let it go at that, okay?"

"Look, Glae," he said slowly, "this is nuts. We're only an hour out. Just an hour and you'll be home."

"I can get there on my own."

"I know you can. But why should you? We've come this far. It hasn't been that bad, has it?"

"No," she said unwillingly. "But this is what I have to do—"

"Here," he said, putting the keys in her hand. "You take the car. I'll find some other way."

"No, you need to take it."

"But you're the one who rented it, Glae!"

She sighed, shook her head. "Fact is, I can't drive at night," she said. "Especially in the rain. My night vision is shot, I have flash recovery problems—it's just not safe for me."

"Well then, all the more reason for us to press on together," he said. "I'll get you home. I promise."

Glae half turned, arms folded, thinking.

"I'm a good guy," she heard Mike say. "Just an everyday good guy. I know I can't appreciate the safety issues that women have. I'm not saying you should—Hey," he snapped his fingers, "did you ever read Gavin de Becker's book?"

"No."

"*The Gift of Fear*," Mike said. "It's all about personal safety, especially for women. He says if you're stranded in a strange place, if you pick some stranger out of the crowd to ask for help, you're most likely completely safe. But you should *never* accept help from someone who just walks up to you and offers."

She turned to him. "And?"

"You picked me, remember?" Mike said. "I didn't approach you."

Glae did not think it was that simple. But she felt herself wavering. It was getting later, the rain was picking up again, the rest area seemed peopled solely by unfamiliar male faces. And Brittany was

waiting for her at home. After all, Mike was no longer a stranger, at least not a *total* stranger. He had done nothing even remotely out of line. And he actually read books! Misgivings notwithstanding, it seemed better to trust him than to start over with someone else!

"Okay," she said. She handed him the keys. "But I'm calling a cab to meet us when we get there. And you're taking that cab to wherever you want to go. Okay?"

"That's fine," he said. "I really appreciate that."

Going to the passenger door, she threw her case and purse into the back seat and got in. Once again closeted in the small Stratus, she worked, as Mike boarded, to quell the feeling of entrapment. She took heart in the way he quoted de Becker what's-his-name. She cheered herself with the reminder that in an hour or so she'd be safe home.

Besides, she'd had an inspiration.

Sometimes Chet purely amazed himself. You silver-tongued rascal, you.

Still, that was a close call. Unlike others he had known, including Cheri, this Glae was a head's-up gal. Mostly. Fortunately for Chet, she had the typical flaws. Unwillingness to disbelieve. Dependence on specious good fortune. Reflexive politeness. Faith in "benevolent" Providence. He had Glae pegged now, knew exactly what was going on in her head. From here on out things would be easy.

Setting the cruise control at seventy-two, Chet aimed the car east. His companion busily installed a new battery in her cell phone and then pressed numbers. While she did her business, Chet made his plans.

As they neared Ann Arbor, he would have her direct him to her house, where she'd said she'd have a cab waiting.

"Hi," Glae said. "I need to order a cab for a pickup in Ann Arbor. From Scio Church area, down to central campus . . . One thirty, plus or minus . . . No, A.M., one thirty A.M."

Here, timing was everything. During the very last leg, as they approached Glae's house (Chet would know it from the cab waiting in front), he would club Glae in the head with his fist, knocking her out.

"Corner of Ashcraft and Rix Road . . . Exactly."

He would continue past Glae's house. Stop someplace and secure Glae with his necktie. Then drive around for a while till he was sure the cab had given up and left.

"Right in front will be fine. We'll spot him."

Then he'd take Glae back to her house, where he would hustle her inside.

"Okay, see you then."

And enjoy a nice long visit with her.

And Brittany.

Fifty minutes later, Glae said goodnight and clicked her phone shut. She'd woken Marshall up, making him crabby. But, she pointed out to herself, he *had* asked her to call every couple of hours. This was it till morning. She was a half hour or less away from home.

"Exit here," she directed Mike. "Left at the top." Mike complied, propelling them onto a divided boulevard. It was well past one A.M. The rain had stopped. Traffic was light. Glae was exhausted, but felt good. Against the odds she had made it home.

"Right here," she directed. Mike swerved the car onto another large four-lane boulevard. "Now turn right again."

"Where?" he asked, surprised.

"Right here, right *here*."

Mike yanked the car onto a driveway and into a parking lot, bouncing the Stratus suspension. The lot's yellow-lined damp black vastness yawned empty down to the brightly lighted storefront, where a handful of cars were parked. "What is this?" Mike asked, looking at the sign, sounding honestly puzzled. "Mye-er?"

"Mey-Yer," she corrected. "Meijer Thrifty Acres. They're all over the place—you mean you haven't seen one before?"

He laughed. "I don't get out much."

Glae glanced over at him. He had delivered that line with perfect off-handedness. Still, if his not knowing what a Meijer was meant that he was not from this area—or this region: Meijer stores were all over Michigan—then just about all of her assumptions were out the window. No harm either way. Her exit strategy was playing out perfectly. "It's kind of like a Wal-Mart," she said casually. "Oh look, there's the cab. Pull over there."

Mike did so, easing into the space next to a large white idling Plymouth Cab. "I don't get it," he said.

"Get what?"

"I thought the cab was meeting us at your house."

"Oh no," Glae said brightly, unclicking her seat belt. "I remembered I need a few odds and ends for tomorrow. If I pick them up now, it'll save me running out later." She got out, then peered back into the car at him. "This is where you get off," she said cheerfully.

"Okay, sure." He shut off the engine and got out of the car. Going to the trunk, he said, "I thought you can't drive at night."

"It's true," she replied, tucking her purse under her arm. "But the rain's stopped, and I'm only a hop-skip-jump from my place. I'll make it just fine." The cabbie, Pakistani by the looks of him, had gotten out of his cab too. A pair of witching-hour shoppers strolled by. Glae went to Mike as he slammed the trunk shut, slinging his overnight bag over his shoulder. Looking older and quite wan—it had been, she reflected, a *hell* of a day—he handed her the keys, and they shook

hands. "It's been real," she told him. "Have a good life."

"Wait a minute," he said, "I owe you for my end of the rental."

"Forget it," she said cheerily. "You got me here safe. Consider it my treat."

"Okay. Thanks." His smile seemed pasted on, his body language brittle and put out. Perhaps, Glae thought, it's just the late hour and the long day catching up with him. Who knows?

And who cares?

"Bye, Mike," she said, and marched toward the store entrance without looking back. She heard doors close, an engine rev, and the hiss of tires on damp pavement as she went through the double automatic doors. Only when inside did she look back out to see the white Plymouth Cab turn right and vanish.

Meijer's small eating commons was deserted at this hour. Glae put her purse, briefcase, and keys on a table, bought herself a Coke, and sat down, sipping. She did not want a Coke, and she really did not want to delay getting home. And she most certainly needed no "odds and ends" for Brittany's party. Those had all been secured weeks before, victims of Glae's scythelike lists. Nope, she thought, this little visit to Meijer Thrifty Acres was aimed at disengaging from Mr. Mike English in the safest, most public way. She thought she had handled it rather well. She'd just sit here and wait until she was sure he was good and gone—taking with him no knowledge of where she lived, who she worked for, or even her last name.

So she waited. And waited a bit more. And then, ready to leave, she picked up the car keys.

What would suck, Chet thought, is if I can't open the lid when it's time to climb out.

Because then I could be trapped in here till Glae returns the rental car. Which could be twelve hours from now.

Already it was very stuffy, he was getting hot, and it was cramped as hell, the trunk in no way designed for the comfort of a full-grown man. At least a live one.

Yes, it would indeed suck if he could not get out. But Chet told himself to have faith. The last minute plan revision had worked beautifully so far. In return for a sawbuck, the cabbie had been happy to loop around the store and drop Chet off in the darkness by the truck bays. Chet had slipped to the corner to reconnoiter and saw the Stratus sitting where he had left it, unattended and unobserved. With swift boldness he'd gone to the car, opened the trunk, stowed his laptop, and climbed in. Pulling the lid down, he'd wedged a piece of scrap plastic into the trunk latch and held the lid shut.

After a while she came back, no doubt shopped out. He heard her hum as she got in. The engine purred, the car moved, and they

cruised for a bit. Then the car had slowed and come to an idling stop. He'd heard the grinding of an automatic garage door opener, and then the Stratus engine quit. Chet felt the car's suspension move as Glae got out and closed the door. Footsteps on concrete echoed, and he discerned her exiting into what was probably the house proper.

Still humming.

As he lay there in the trunk, breathing old air and waiting for things to calm down inside, Chet hoped that Glae would hum for him later.

When he could stand it no more, he pushed upward on the trunk lid. It did not budge. Chet's gut clenched and he pushed harder. The lid swung up and he just barely caught it before it pivoted to its extremity. Slowly, silently, Chet eased his aching self up over the lip of the trunk. The garage was dark, and yet alight also—from outside security lights. Fat lot of good that does her tonight, he thought.

The double garage door was immediately in front of him. To his left and back was a dark on-end rectangle, a door, no doubt leading into the house. Chet took several deep easy breaths. Then he began to step very carefully, very silently around the Stratus toward the door. In the dim light he could make out a lawn mower, a coil of hose, and a wall-mounted pegboard dark with tools of various shapes. One was a stubby, thick pry bar. Chet slipped it off its hooks, hefted it, and proceeded to the door. No hint of light showed around the door.

He did not think it would be locked. He put his hand on the knob. It turned slowly, smoothly at his touch. Chet stood as motionless as possible and slipped off his shoes. Then he eased the door back an inch. No light inside, and not a sound. He eased the door back further till it was half open. Peered into the half-darkness of a mostly dark room that he perceived was a kitchen. He could see silhouettes of a table, some chairs, a counter. No movement, no sound. Softly he stepped inside—

And then lights blazed, brilliant bright beams from ceiling spots and a chandelier over the table and work lights by the stove. Chet winced and shielded his eyes reflexively with a forearm. Then, not breathing, he peered past his arm.

A dozen feet from him sat Glae, on a tall, high-backed bar stool. She wore a cream-colored terry cloth robe, belted at the waist. Her long legs and bare feet were drawn up and tucked under. She looked perfectly relaxed, gripping in two slender hands a shiny chrome long-barrel handgun, pointed steadily at the spot between Chet's eyes.

If a mouth in a hard straight line can be called a smile, Glae was smiling. "Stopped by to return the trunk key?"

Sticks on the Prowl

Charles Cutter



Illustration by Tim Foley

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By middle age, assuming some degree of self-awareness, you can trace the unfolding patterns of your life. Granted, most patterns begin as random circumstance—the country you're born in, the parents you're born to, that chance meeting with the woman who would become your wife—to varying degrees, such things are out of your control. They seem inevitable only in retrospect.

Other patterns are the result of willful decisions.

My name is Brad Glennon; I'm fifty-eight years old, a practicing attorney. I've spent my entire career as a public defender (an act of penance, rather than a lack of ambition). Two nights a week I teach a class in Comparative Theology at the local college. I don't address the supernatural aspects of religion—I'm a devout atheist—but rather how religions, throughout history, have embraced moral precepts that are eventually codified into law. I've been fixated on issues of morality and legality all my adult life. This particular pattern is easy for me to trace.

It's because of a murder I committed forty years ago.

Drake leaned forward across the table and whispered conspiratorially, "Check it out, Brad. Sticks on the prowl." I casually turned my head, knowing what I'd find: two of Baywood's finest swaggering into the luncheonette. Adolescent giggles and shouts gave way to cautious murmurs.

The brothers in blue secured soft drinks from the boy behind the counter—no money changed hands, I noticed—and Sergeant Curt "Lucky" Stryke led his partner to our table.

"Boys," he growled; it was his warmest greeting. "This is Officer Denner. He's our newest recruit. He's from Idaho."

I spoke quickly, before Drake had a chance to open his mouth. "I have an aunt in Idaho." A lie, of course, but it was the first thing I could think of.

"Yeah?" Denner's smile was impersonal. "What part?"

"Boise." It was the only Idaho city I knew.

"Oh." Disappointed. "I'm from Pocatello."

Sergeant Stryke's eyes moved from me to fix on Drake. "You're being awfully quiet today."

Drake shrugged. "I'm waiting for a more interesting topic than Idaho."

Denner's impersonal smile vanished.

"Drake here is one of our more prominent young citizens." The fingers of Stryke's hand curled, uncurled, then curled again around the handle of his nightstick—the Baywood policeman's weapon of choice against the criminal element and the source of the nickname we gave them. Stryke's eyes narrowed. "Been keepin' outta trouble, boy?"

Drake waited to respond, first finishing his soda and then noisily slurping air through the straw. He leaned back in his chair, striving for a relaxed appearance.

"Curt, I worry about you." His voice was sarcastically intimate. "What are you going to do for fun when I leave this dime store town?"

"You planning on doing that?"

I broke in then, hoping to defuse the confrontation. "We're both leaving in two months. I start college and Drake's heading for Colorado."

Drake looked at me but spoke to Stryke: "And poor Curt's arrest record will be cut in half."

Stryke turned to Denner but spoke to Drake: "This boy has kept us busy. I've nailed him twice for fighting, three times for speeding, once for loitering, once for vandalism, and five times for truancy."

"It's nice to be remembered," Drake said.

"The vandalism charge was dropped," I reminded Stryke.

"So you're leaving in September, huh?" Stryke leaned forward and spoke in an uncommonly quiet voice. "You be sure to invite me to your farewell party, ya hear?"

With that, he headed for the door. Denner followed behind.

Drake watched as they crossed the street, then he smiled broadly. "Boys," he said, loudly mocking Stryke's gruff tones. "I'd like ya to meet our newest re-crewcut."

"You better be careful."

Drake waved his hand, dismissing my concern. "I've just gotta duck him for another couple months."

"But you've never learned to duck," I reminded him.

Summers in Baywood were hot and uneventful, offering little entertainment. Drake and I walked slowly across town, with the general idea of hitting Madison Street Cinema for an air-conditioned matinee. Through the dust-covered window of his fix-it shop, we could see Mr. Farley lecturing a disrespectful toaster. The building next to his, a used furniture store, had been out of business for almost a year. The space behind it, up to the alley, was concealed by a rotting wood fence; the half-unhinged gate was partially open. This was sufficiently unusual to qualify as a Time Waster. During a Baywood summer, those qualifications were easy to meet.

Drake pulled the gate the rest of the way open and walked in. I followed.

Joey Elwood was a small, pale-complexioned nine year old, morose and preoccupied. He had apparently been working on a tall, hollowed-out electric water heater. A variety of tools were scattered about the ground. At the moment, he had a cigar box full of shotgun shells and firecrackers; he was slicing them open with a razor blade, depositing the powder in a glass jar.

"Whatcha workin' on, Joey?"

"Spaceship," he told Drake matter-of-factly.

"Yeah?" Drake, leaning to one knee, crooked his head to examine the interior of the water heater through a hole where the heating

seen. I

stepped up on a cement block to peer in from the top. Joey had obviously put a lot of careful work into the cylindrical craft.

"How's it work?" I asked.

"When it's finished, the top will be the entrance and exit. When I'm inside, I'll pull the top on and lock it in place. I've been taking foam rubber from those junk couches—" He indicated their skeletal remains. "—to pad the inside walls. That'll cushion the landing impact. From here down—" He drew a line with his finger, indicating the lower third of the vehicle. "—will be filled with fuel."

Drake kicked at the bottom of four large, worn truck tires stacked one on top the other. "What're these for?"

"I got those from Mack at the dump. Their inside circumference matches the outside circumference of my spaceship. They'll fit real tight around it. When I land, they'll also help cushion the impact and allow me to roll to a stop."

"Pretty good thinking," Drake said; he looked at me, and winked. "And what's the gunpowder for?"

"Fuel."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"It's what they used in *From the Earth to the Moon*."

Ah. That explained where he got the idea. I remembered the Jules Verne novel being available at the Baywood Elementary School library.

"Where ya going?" Drake asked. "The moon? Mars?"

"Anywhere," Joey said bleakly. "I hate this planet."

"I hear ya," Drake replied, clearly sympathetic. Then: "But I don't think they're using gunpowder for fuel anymore. It's too dangerous. They're using some kind of liquid fuel."

"Yeah?" Joey looked up from his razor blade, intrigued by the information. He squinted against the sunlight; his small face looked ninety years old.

I walked to the gate, a signal to Drake. "We're going to the movies," I told Joey. "Wanna come?"

"No thanks. I've still got a lot of work to do on this."

Drake moved beside me, still looking at Joey. "I wish there was enough room for me to go with you." He sounded like he meant it.

I pulled the gate shut behind us.

And so the Baywood summer went on like any other summer—but not for long.

The phone call came Friday morning, just before three A.M. I mumbled a sleepy, irritated version of "Hello."

"I'd like to speak to Brad Glennon."

I told the woman she had him.

"I have a message from a Drake Young. Is he a friend of yours?"

Now I was awake. "Yeah . . . what's the message?"

"He just asked me to call you, to let you know that he's being held at the Baywood police station."

I waited for more information; none was coming. "Anything else? What happened?"

"He just asked me to tell you. That's all he said."

She hung up.

I made it to the station house in less than fifteen minutes. Officer Denner was on duty; as new kid on the block, he'd inherited the worst hours. I asked if I could see Drake.

Denner was clearly bored with the shift and was in the mood for talking. "Sergeant Stryke told me about you—that you're one of the good kids, never been in trouble. But you keep getting mixed up in this Drake kid's problems."

"He's my friend."

"He's a hood."

I didn't argue; he held all the cards. He didn't have to let me in. It wasn't visiting hours, and I wasn't family or attorney, but I was a "good" kid, and it was something for him to do. Boredom bends a lot of rules.

He stood up and unlocked the door leading down to the cells. "Help yourself. But lemme tell ya, your friend's in over his head this time. Don't get pulled down with him." After a cursory weapons check, I was on my way.

Drake was the sole occupant of the basement jail, resting in one of the four cells Baywood allotted its criminal population. He was lying on the cot in the dimly lit cage, his left arm draped across his face.

I grabbed the bars of the door and shook them, like in a prison movie. A dull metallic echo filled the enclosure.

Drake reacted with a start, half-rising, shuddering, coughing.

He eased himself off the cot and crossed the cell with slow, pained movements. The light from the hallway struck his face as he stood before me: Six inches of gauze and bandage covered his left cheek; his left eye was swollen shut. Some green antiseptic ointment stained the abrasions on his chin and right cheek. The corner of his lower lip had been stitched. He leaned forward at a graceless angle, his left arm crooked to support that side of his chest.

I wanted to ask what happened—even though I knew—but nausea and anger wouldn't let me speak.

"That crazy pig nearly killed me this time." Fear and the lip injury rendered his speech slurred and hoarse.

My sickness at the sight of him began to pass, but my anger increased. "Tell me what happened. I have to know everything."

He swallowed audibly, then leaned against the bars for support. "I was parked out in back of Food World—" That large lot, not visible from the road, was a popular meeting place for teenagers. "—under the streetlight, installing a radio in my Ford. Vince Harding was there; we'd just pulled the unit from his truck. I traded him my two-ton jack for it." He paused for a cough, which he fought to suppress, then he spat on the floor. "Anyway, I was sprawled across the seat with my head under the dash when Vince yelled, 'Sticks!,' fired up his truck and took off. Naturally, it was Stryke. He pulled up with his

headlights glaring in through my open door. I started working my way out of the car, to see what he wanted. I figured it was another loitering beef. He asked what I was doing there, and I told him. He asked why Vince took off like that, and I said Vince was probably afraid of cops."

Knowing Drake, I'm sure he did this in a fashion to let Stryke know he *wasn't* afraid of cops. "What happened next?"

"Stryke started looking in my car with his flashlight—he checked out the radio—then he spotted my pistol case under the front seat."

My spine stiffened. People with guns never mix well with cops.

"He asked me about it. I reminded him that I was eighteen now—an adult—and that a gun in a zippered case isn't against the law in this state. Stryke told me *he* was the law. He reached in, picked up the case, unzipped it, took the pistol out, and said, 'Stainless steel .357 Magnum. That's more gun than I'm carrying.' Then he—" Drake's voice broke and tears welled up in his eyes. "—he hit me with it, across the face." His fingers gingerly touched the bandage covering the damage. I clenched my fists.

"I was scared and hurt. I pushed him away, tried to drive off. He had his stick out before I could start my car. After that, I just remember being in the emergency room. They patched me up, told me I had bruised ribs, not cracked. They told me I was lucky." He gave a brief, bitter

laugh. "I gave the nurse your number. I asked her to call you."

"She did."

"On the drive back here, Stryke kept telling me he had me this time. No more juvenile court; he reminded me I was an adult. He rattled off a list of charges—carrying a concealed weapon, battery on a police officer, resisting arrest with violence. He swears he's gonna bury me this time. It's his word against mine. He can do it."

"Have you talked to a lawyer?"

"Not yet. Stryke read me my rights, but said he wouldn't question me until after I met with the public defender in the morning. He said it was an airtight case and he wasn't taking any chances." Drake coughed again, winced, spat again. In a desperate whisper: "Brad—can you bail me out? I've already called my dad, and he refused. Said he's given up on me. If I can only get out of here, I'll take off. It's my only chance."

We waited in silence for several minutes; then I gave him my decision. "No. Not yet. I'm gonna get you out of here, one way or another. But I want to try to do it without making you a fugitive."

His voice sounded hopeless. "How? How can you do that?"

"I don't know." I forced a smile. "Give me some time. I'll think of something."

Drake looked like he believed me. I even half-believed myself.

I went home and tried to sleep, but couldn't. I sat in my room,

trying to think, kept hitting blank walls. About ten A.M. I called the public defender, who wasn't in. His secretary told me she'd have him return my call. He did, just before noon. I asked him about Drake, but he wasn't "at liberty to discuss the case." I pressed him for a guess as to Drake's chances of acquittal. He refused to speculate, but—in a tone as hopeless as Drake's—concluded our conversation with, "I'm afraid your friend is in a great deal of trouble."

I left the house, wandered around town. I bumped into some kids who expressed sympathy for Drake, hatred for Stryke. I spotted Stryke handing out a traffic ticket and felt an intense desire to kill him. I kept walking.

I passed the fix-it shop; Mr. Farley had his head buried in a television set. Next door, I found Joey still working on his spaceship. It looked ready for takeoff: The tires were securely in place, the work area had been cleaned, and a small ladder allowed the young astronaut access to the top of his craft. An overfilled knapsack suggested a trip was about to be undertaken. In an absurd fashion, the place did resemble a launch pad.

Joey was holding a light bulb in one hand and a hammer in the other.

"Whatcha up to now?"

"The ignition system," he explained. He pointed to a box: "There are enough extension cords in there to reach the plug-in at the back of Mr. Farley's shop.

They connect to this timer—" He indicated it on the ground beside him. "—and I set it for ten minutes. That gives me plenty of time to get inside and seal the top." He carefully tapped the glass on the light bulb, shattering it. "When the current connects to the light socket it ignites the filament—" He checked to see that the filament was still intact. "—and that ignites the gas. And away I go."

"Gas?"

"Ten gallons of gas. I switched to liquid fuel."

Seeing how serious he was, how detailed his conception and work had been, it was easy to forget how hopeless his project was. I even thought of bailing Drake out, sending him away on this spaceship. No one had ever been extradited from Jupiter.

"When's launch time?"

"Tomorrow at two P.M. Mr. Farley closes his shop sometime between noon and one on Saturdays. I don't want him to spot my electric line before takeoff." Joey turned to look at me and distrust wrinkled his thoughtful young face. Perhaps for the first time he was seeing me as more adult than kid. "You won't tell anyone about this, will you?"

I couldn't fault his intuition, for I responded in a fashion more becoming an adult than a kid; I lied, convincingly. "No, Joey. I won't tell anyone."

A plan was whispering in my ears. Against all reason, I listened to myself.

Saturday afternoon. Things

were proceeding well. Stryke liked to work weekends; it was a good opportunity to keep an eye on the teenagers roaming around. I had been surreptitiously following him all day, hoping no "crime" would develop to spoil my timetable. At 1:53 P.M., seven minutes to launch, he was parked across from the high school gym, watching the delinquents playing basketball. As always, he looked hungry for trouble. I was about to feed him to it.

"Sergeant Stryke," I said, approaching the cruiser. "Can I talk to you?"

"I ain't wastin' none of my breath on that Drake hood."

"It's not about Drake. It's about Joey Elwood."

He squinted his eyes, thinking. "That runt kid? Pasty-faced little know-it-all?"

"Yeah. I saw him siphoning gas out of my tank."

This perked the sergeant up; real crime. "Naw," he said; it was too good to be true. "What would he do that for? He's too young to have a car."

"I was talking to him last week," I explained. "He said he was building a spaceship. So I followed him after I saw him stealing my gas, and saw him take it to this thing he's working on. He put the gas in that."

Stryke wasn't following this very well; it wasn't simple, and it confused him. Time was slipping by: 1:56 P.M.

"Ya know," he said, "I have heard a couple people talk about losing gas this past month. I bet

that kid's been stealing gas for a good while now." He was happily embellishing my story. "Where is this 'spaceship'?"

"Couple blocks from here. Behind that abandoned building, next to Mr. Farley's shop."

"Get in," he ordered me. "We'll go fix that kid."

He parked his cruiser in front of the old furniture store. We both walked along the wooden fence that separated it from Mr. Farley's place. As he pulled open the broken gate, Stryke called out, "Joey Elwood! Police! Get out here!"

I checked my watch; I had synchronized it with Joey's timer. Liftoff time was upon us, only seconds away. I was too close to guarantee my safety; Stryke was too far away to guarantee his demise.

"Joey's inside the ship," I told him.

"Stupid kid. Look at that damn thing leakin' gas."

Stupid cop. He swaggered up to the craft, stepping into a puddle of gasoline. I backed away as Stryke drew out his billy club.

"Climb outta there, punk." I pressed my body against the side of the building and could no longer see Stryke. I heard him slash his club against the metal cylinder; it rang hollowly, then exploded.

The heat followed me around the corner. Smoldering debris scattered about the ground, flaming bits of foam rubber fell from the sky. The old wood fence and building were burning. I ran to

the police car and made an emergency radio call for an ambulance, the fire department, anybody. The panic in my voice was not from acting.

Time stood still. Thick black smoke from the burning truck tires blotted out the sun. Sirens screamed in the distance.

With the death of Sergeant Stryke, the only witness against Drake, the charges had to be dropped, but not without some lecturing from Judge Winston. There was no case now, according to the rules of law, but the judge made it seem as if he were doing Drake a personal favor.

"Young man," the judge intoned solemnly, "Sergeant Stryke was well respected in this community for his concern for young people such as yourself. He gave his life trying to rescue a child. In his memory, this court will give you a second chance—don't waste it. I'm dismissing all charges."

We even made it to Stryke's funeral. It seemed the least we could do, tolerating with straight faces the endless eulogizing of Stryke, hearing of his love of children, of law and order, of all

American ideals. He was given a colorful hero's burial, with flag-draped coffin. The mayor, the police chief, local and imported sticks, and a great number of townspeople showed up for this Time Waster.

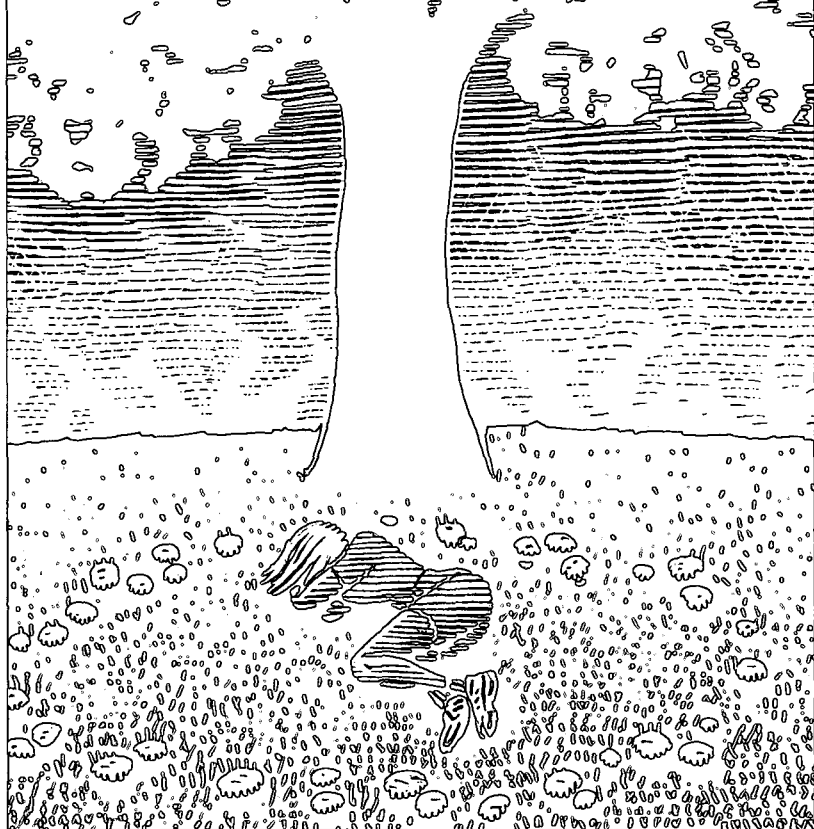
At the centerpiece of the V.I.P. delegation, watching the services for his would-be "savior," was Joey Elwood, age nine. I'd been able to convince him the day before take-off that, for safety's sake, he should emulate the NASA program and make his first space flight an unmanned one. He'd watched the ill-fated launch from "mission control," his second story bedroom window half a block away.

Facing the police, the reporters, and Joey, I stuck to my story—that I'd approached Stryke at the last minute, afraid Joey might have been serious about his spaceship, and that Stryke—concerned for Joey's safety—had barreled ahead in a rescue attempt. Of course, I insisted I'd told Stryke that Joey wasn't aboard the craft.

Even the other sticks had to admit that Stryke didn't always listen to teenagers.

DEATH KID

D. A. McGuire



MONDAY, DAY ONE (OF MY SUSPENSION FROM SCHOOL)

"I talked to Mrs. Shore down at the library. She knows . . ." A pause, just long enough to see if I had her attention. "Mrs. Angless. Do you know who I mean? Mrs. Angless is the lady who found the body in her yard."

My mother was standing next to me, frowning down at two cardboard boxes full of old books, magazines, calendars, and manila envelopes filled with God-knows-what. I'd been sitting, hunched forward, TV remote in hand, flicking through channel after channel, looking for news about the murder. Now I sat up straight, looked at her unforgiving expression, and said, "Mrs. Shore thinks the police should have listened to what she . . . what Mrs. Angless had to say."

This wasn't going very well. "Anyhow, I didn't get the fifth degree, either, you know, about what was I doing at the library during school hours. Mrs. Shore just walked over to me and . . ." So which was it? Was my mother hanging on every word I said, or ignoring me totally? "Well, she complained, said the police never *listen* to people, that they're too busy formulating their next question. She said that both girls were *placed*. That's the word she used. Of course, everything Mrs. Shore knows is second hand, but . . ." I stopped again. This was the only thing people in the neighborhood were talking about. Some were even talking "serial killer." In the last six months, here in our small

town, two young women had been found strangled, each with her throat tied up so tight with some sort of cord or rope that the skin and muscle were nearly bit through. The first victim had been found in War Memorial Park last May; the second victim had been found closer, about a twenty-minute walk from here.

Both deaths had to have had an impact on my mother. And yet strangely enough, you wouldn't have known she was all that upset. You wouldn't even have known she was listening to me. Her dark eyes were sort of fogged over and she was staring right through me as though I were transparent.

"I'm sorry," I said, suddenly aware that I might be scaring her.

"Sorry?"

"I was just curious." Well, that wasn't the smartest thing to say. "Look, I'll get right on this." I pushed a box with my foot. Out to the garage, she had told me, all of it, everything. "I just thought I'd flip through the channels, see if the police have come up with any leads." And then because her expression—anger, worry, impatience? even I couldn't tell—didn't waver one bit, I said again, "I really am sorry."

"Sorry?" she snapped, coming to life. From wherever she had drifted to a few seconds ago, she was back. "Sorry for getting into a fight barely two weeks into school? Look at you, your face is a mess. You've been suspended for two weeks. I'm sick of hearing you say you're sorry. Just make your-

self useful and take all this out to the garage."

"The body was found not far from here," I murmured as my mother walked away, hands on her head. It couldn't have been easy for her; she worked in the school administration office. She was the assistant superintendent's secretary, for crying out loud, and here I was, her only child, waiting out ten days of at-home suspension right at the start of my sophomore year. So maybe it wasn't the second murder so close to home that was making her act strangely; maybe she was just honest-to-God disgusted with me. I mean, how did she hold her head up at work? Everyone knew.

Just like everyone knew that two nights ago the body of a girl had been found in Mrs. Alice Angless's front yard under a giant, hundred-year-old white oak. And though the police had managed to block a lot of the "more pertinent information" from the public and the media, it had been noted by at least one reporter that "the body had been placed in the same position as that of Donna Holcomber, 17, who was found murdered at War Memorial Park last spring. She was lying on her right side with her hands tucked under her head." Then one of the investigators, a state trooper who sometimes worked with my mother's off-again, on-again boyfriend, had mentioned, almost offhandedly, "Yeah, like someone laid them both down to sleep."

But when a reporter had asked,

"And do the police view that as significant?" the trooper had said, with a shrug, "You never know, but we have to make note of everything."

Conceited jerk.

"What's in these boxes anyhow?" I asked, trailing my mother from the living room into our small kitchen. We had our own place, a converted summer cottage which my mother decided merited the more gracious term bungalow. It was small, two bedrooms, but had a small back porch, or breezeway, and a spacious front porch. We weren't on the water—that kind of house would run you into the mid-to-high six figures in this town—but we were only a five minute walk from the bay.

Still, it seemed my mother was never satisfied and never really happy. After breaking up with Jake, a detective on the police force here in Manamesset, she'd gone through a short succession of other boyfriends, none of whom seemed to suit her—or me. Now she was back with Jake, sort of. In fact, the night before my big fight with Covey—which I'll get to presently—I'd even confronted her about it. Even though I was only fifteen and understood I wasn't entitled to tell my mother who to date (anymore than she was similarly entitled to instruct me on which girls I could see), I felt my opinion should hold some weight, right? I mean, I was her son. But she'd blown up like a firecracker with a short fuse.

"I don't intend to get mixed up

with a cop, Herbie, that's all there is to it!"

"But you were . . . mixed up with Jake for a little while, and now you seem to be back together."

"Even in a small town, even . . ." She had looked at me, face torn between fury and despair. "Damn, Herbie, Jake might walk out my front door and never come back. Don't you understand? I can't deal with the uncertainty of that."

"But I might walk out that front door . . ."

I'd never had a chance to finish, because she had flown at me, slapping my face.

Let me emphasize the significance of that; my mother had never hit me before. Not the time when I was only six and ran out into the road and nearly got struck by a bus. Not the day I called my Aunt Clem an ugly old cow. Not even when I kicked my kindergarten teacher on the first day of school. Oh, I got *spoken to* plenty, and for a while being sent to my room was a popular punishment, but basically I was just your average, polite, all-around normal kid. In short, I never gave my mother much reason to discipline me, so when she'd slapped me, then backed away, eyes welling up with tears, it was extraordinary, to say the least. I'd been more surprised than upset or angry.

"Don't *ever* say that to me again," she'd said, shaking and crying.

I don't know how I even got through last Thursday night.

Or maybe I do. I'd called Emma, and we'd talked a long while. Which was the whole problem, you see, because Emma Presley was Covey Ralph's girlfriend and Covey was, if not my best friend, then the closest thing I had to a best friend. So when Friday came—a mere three days ago—all hell had broken loose. What I'd done was make the major mistake of putting my arm around Emma's shoulders as we stood at her locker. I admit it, I liked Emma Presley. I'll admit this too, I'd been in kind of a quandary what to do about Covey. I knew there was going to be no easy way to tell him . . .

When I did meet up with him later in front of the door to the boys' locker room, he'd called me on it. Now, I tend to be a peacemaker, not a fighter. I'd been a peer mediator back in junior high, one of those kids who listens to both sides of a dispute, then arbitrates a solution. I'd been a darned good mediator, too, but this hadn't been some other kid's problem I was trying to work out. It had been my own.

So it was outside the boys' locker room that I met up with Covey and a couple of his buddies. In the movies they call them goons, and the word certainly fits because when Covey Ralph feels he needs backup, he goes for the biggest, creepiest, most unshaven hoodlums he can find.

Well, a little shoving and pushing eventually led to the both of us just losing it. I'm smaller than Covey by a good forty pounds,

which made it easy for him to land a good one to my lower left jaw. He was sputtering a lot of crazy things, too, like "You want her? You want Emma? My best friend, you stupid . . ." This was followed by a lot of expletives. If you've ever seen a high school fight, you can probably imagine what came next. A ring of kids, made up mostly of Covey's goons, circled around us. It took a half dozen teachers—all male, except for Mrs. Limmerman, who's as big as most WWF wrestlers—to tear Covey off of me. I've known Covey all my life; he can be a real mean fighter when he feels he's been wronged. And no doubt about it, Covey felt that me sliding my arm around his girlfriend's shoulders was a definite wrong. Of course, it hadn't helped that I'd also leaned over and kissed Emma, too.

The upshot was we were both suspended for two weeks. I hadn't started the fight, but apparently because I'd had the gall to hit him back—I landed one good chop under his right eye—I had to take the punishment, too. So here I was, helping my mother clean out some boxes she'd kept since Year One, lugging them out to the garage when I should have been sitting in history class, and she should have been taking dictation from the assistant superintendent.

"Old tax records, books, magazines. A lot of —— unimportant junk," my mother finally answered me, startling me with her use of a particularly picturesque adjective. "And of course I know

another girl was murdered not far from here!" Her voice started to tremble. "Now get this stuff out to the garage. You can drag it out to the curb at the end of the week."

"Look, Mom, about everything, I really am sorry."

She just glared at me, then sweeping her fingers back through her long black hair, muttered: "There are six more boxes in my bedroom. Get them all."

June 16, 1981

Jim,

As the day gets closer I feel more and more smothered. Oh, is this natural? This desire to second-guess what I was so sure I wanted? You say what we had was just an infatuation, a harmless fling, and that it would never have worked with us. I try so hard to believe that, and by the light of day I go through all the motions. I've chosen the dresses for my sisters, and the menu, and the seating arrangements, and when I'm with him, everything seems right and perfect and normal.

It's only late at night that I start to doubt . . .

Still, I'm writing you now to tell you that I intend to do the right thing. I will marry him. I just have one last favor to ask you. Burn all my letters, please.

Emily

"How are things?"

I looked up. I had parked myself on top of two of the boxes and

was reading the letter in the pale blue envelope I'd found. What happened is that as I tried to balance three boxes in my arms—big mistake, I wasn't that agile or strong—I'd lost the top one. Magazines, manuals, and a whole lot of tax forms had gone flying everywhere. And right there, in among all that paper, had been this letter. It was in a faded blue envelope with the name "Jim" on the outside. Curious, I'd opened it, read it, and now was looking up at Emma.

"I thought it would be okay for me to stop by. Your mother won't mind."

"She went in to work late."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "She's upset about this suspension, isn't she?"

I folded the letter; it had been none of my business, just some old letter to some old boyfriend whom Miss Emily Andrews hadn't married. But apparently this Jim had done better than burn her letters; he'd returned them, or at least this particular one. Or maybe she had never sent it, but I doubted that. It was very creased, and the paper was soft in the folds. This letter had been opened and then refolded many times.

"Yeah, but she'll get over it. I tend to upset my mother on a regular basis."

"Do you?" Emma replied, trying not to smile. She looked real good today; her hair was green again, but I was learning to look past that. She had smooth, very white skin and lively blue eyes. She still wore too much makeup,

and her jeans and sweater looked sort of painted-on, but that didn't bother me either. Emma Presley did and said exactly what she wanted, including: "I didn't come here straight from school, you know. I went to Covey's house first. A friend dropped me off." She nodded to the garage door. "She's waiting, in fact, so I can't stay long. I just wanted you to know that he took it real well."

"What did Covey take real well?"

"That it's over between him and me."

"Hey, Emma, you were with Covey for barely a week, for crying out . . ."

"It still meant something to him. You shouldn't have done what you did."

"What? Hit him? He hit me first. He waited for me! I swear to God he tried to kill me."

"No, you jerk, what you did with me. Technically, I was still going with Covey and you just moved in."

"Yeah, that's me, Herbert J. Sawyer, Jr., the lady-killer. I just move on in whenever I see a girl I like."

"Don't play stupid. You're not all sweet and innocent. Covey's short-tempered; he reacts with his fists. They say anyone who went to junior high with him knows his reputation. *You* knew it. But you've got a reputation, too."

"I don't want to talk about that." I shoved the letter down into the manila envelope, and as I did, I saw another blue envelope

there, tucked in with the tax forms. I left it there, and looked back at her.

"No, not with what's happening, you probably don't," she said, her voice softening a bit. "Your mother upset by it? My dad . . . he's not taking it well. Checks on my every move lately."

"She's okay," I muttered.

"And as for being a lady-killer, I've heard what they call you, some of the seniors. 'Death Kid.'"

I glared at her; why did she have to bring that up? "So why are you hanging with me? Or are you here to kiss me off, too?"

"You don't mind my green hair, do you?"

"No."

"Then I can put up with your morbid nickname." She leaned over, brushed her lips across my bruised face, and spinning around, walked out.

They were on the bed, scattered across the worn white spread, an assortment of blue-enveloped letters and a pile of old newspapers. And I sat between them, totally confused. From out in the living room a woman's voice was raised in wild and vibrant song, some operatic singer. I pushed aside the envelopes, went to the door.

Who was it? There was a chorus behind the singer, though I didn't recognize her voice. Still, why did my mother need to listen to music like this? Because the whole house—except for my room—was in darkness.

"Mom?"

She didn't answer, though I saw her there, sitting at the far end of the sofa. Arms wound around her knees, she rested her chin on one, head turned down, eyes shut. She must have just come home from work, put on the stereo, sat down and . . .

"Mom." I took a step into the room and she lifted her head, or rather just her eyes, and stared straight at me. Emily Sawyer didn't say a single word, just looked at me with huge, empty eyes.

"Is everything . . ." I stopped short. There was something in her eyes, something that spoke of pain, of disappointment, and perhaps of a fear so deep it seemed to permeate every facet of her being. It couldn't be caused solely by my suspension, because I had been witness to this pain and this unbearable unhappiness my entire life, and through the years I had guessed at its cause.

Okay, I do have a rather odd penchant for tripping over dead bodies. So isn't it only natural that I blame myself for my mother's roller-coaster mood swings? One day she could be so high-strung, so nervous, and so full of energy, that she'd jolt and laugh at the slightest sound, and then mere moments later, and without any warning, she'd drop down into the deepest and most desolate of despairs. On those days it seemed life itself held absolutely no interest for Emily Sawyer, that she was struggling just to hold her head above water. So my mentioning these two recent mur-

ders to her was a big mistake. I could be so stupid.

I turned slightly and saw just behind me, spread across the covers of my bed like the wings of a dying bird, a second letter. I'd found it in another much-creased blue envelope . . .

... I freeze; I burn. When I am in his arms I love only him. There is no doubt in my mind, or in my heart. So then why—when I saw you this afternoon—did I want to cry? How can there be this thing going on in my head, and in my heart? Because if you truly loved me, Jim, you would leave. You would go away.

I looked back. So maybe it was me. Maybe it was these recent murders. Or maybe it was something else, or a combination of things, or . . .

She buried her face against one uplifted knee. I went back into my room and shut the door.

TUESDAY, DAY TWO . . .

"Looks like she's keeping you busy."

I dropped the box on the cement floor, startled but not surprised to see Jake there. Earlier this morning I had awakened to the sound of my mother's voice as she spoke on the phone. She had sounded a little better this morning, though as soon as she saw me her eyes darkened as she dropped them to indicate there were more boxes waiting for me there in the kitchen. Day two and she was determined to keep me

busy. These boxes contained my father's old things:

His winter coat, his good gray suit, and even his slippers and shoes. Dead now twelve years, yet she had clung to these things because—I believed—she couldn't bear to part with them. She had seemed energetic and full of purpose as she piled the cardboard boxes with books, papers, and the manuals my father had studied to earn his electrician's license. Our garage was starting to look like a perpetual yard sale—anywhere you stepped you might stumble over my father's old tools, books, even a slicker he'd had since he was ten. When I put it on the plastic crackled, then tore along my shoulders. "Throw it out," she'd said to me.

"Yeah, I'm real busy," I said to Jake. "She's throwing out my father's . . ." I sighed, "old stuff"

"It hasn't been easy for her, Herbie," Jake said, his face assuming a somewhat sympathetic expression. "Your mother really was in love with your father."

"Yeah," I said glumly, kicking a box with my foot. "Good old Herb, Sr., she really loved the guy."

"I'm sure if there's anything here that you wanted . . ."

I cut him off: "There's nothing here I want."

"She sounded better this morning." He was struggling to make small talk. He looked at my face and grimaced a little, as though looking at me made him hurt. "We talked about you, about the suspension and . . ."

I cut him off again: "Yeah, she's

fine with things. Now I got work to do.”

He might have turned away, left me alone to finish the chores. Instead, he noticed the newspapers I'd left on the workbench. One was this morning's edition. I had carefully folded the interior section to the words: “Oak Street Murder Linked to Ball Field Killing.”

He picked it up; I went to get another box.

“Herbie, I'd like to talk to you about your mother some time.”

About what, I wanted to ask. Because she doesn't want to marry you? Oh, yeah, that's what I wanted to tell him. She doesn't even want to get involved with you, and it's because you're a cop, a detective, a man who might walk out her front door and never come back. So, if you want to have a nice, warm heart-to-heart about how you feel about her and how much you'd just love me to be your stepson, well then, forget it.

“But I'll save that for some other time,” he went on, changing the subject entirely. He was looking at the other papers. They were photocopies of the May 31, 2000, edition of the *Cape Cod Courier-Times*. He picked the photocopies up. “About this Holcomber girl, you aren't...”

He left that open, wide open. He might as well have shot a hole straight through me because he knew there was no way Herbert Sawyer, Jr. was going to ignore the fact that a girl had been murdered a few streets away. Or if not murdered there, then dumped in that yard.

I decided I'd taunt him a little: “Curious, that's all.”

No, I wouldn't mention the fact that yesterday, when I should have been doing research on a history project at the library, I'd been sifting through old newspapers instead. I'd been looking for information about the murder of Miss Donna Holcomber, the girl who had been found strangled last May, her body left on the pitcher's mound at the War Memorial ball field. No, I wouldn't mention that at all. Why bother? Jake was holding the story in his hand.

He was refolding it so all but the headlines were visible: “Girl Found Dead at War Memorial Park.”

“Donna Holcomber...” he murmured. “The media have really jumped on this, haven't they?”

“You know the two are related, Jake.”

He was plainly uncomfortable; in fact, I'd never seen Jake so clumsy. “Yeah, there are similarities.” He tapped the paper with his finger, but I heard the tension rip his voice, watched the uncertainty on his face as he said, “Hell, Herbie, you stay out of this.”

“How do you stay out of it when it happens in your own neighborhood? When your own mother is...” I stopped short. So my mother was scared; everyone was scared. When Donna Holcomber's body had been found, there'd been prayer vigils and church meetings and promises from everyone, state police, the D.A., the select-

men, even the governor, that the authorities were making "rapid progress" and an arrest would be "imminent." That had been four months ago. Then, just when things were starting to die down a bit, this second girl turns up dead, strangled, her body placed . . .

Running a hand through my hair, I said, "Everyone is already talking serial killer. Walk into any convenience store, Jake. Hang out for ten minutes at the donut shop. Oh sorry, I'm sure you have. Forgot you were a cop."

Funny how he didn't seem insulted by that remark; he shook his head, at a loss for what to say.

But I still had plenty to say to him. "Two girls strangled," I said matter-of-factly. "No signs of rape, no signs of struggle on either of the bodies. So I wonder—" I picked up a rag to wipe my hands on. "—if you looked around, went through your extensive database, or even your dusty old police files, you might find a few more."

"We've looked," he said automatically, shaking his head. "I don't want *you* involved in this." There, that was the old Jake. Two or three years ago, maybe, that tone—strict, authoritarian, you-better-listen-to-me-boy!—might have deterred me. Now it did nothing for me.

Absolutely nothing.

"No law says I can't go to my local library, read a few old papers, talk to people."

"I know you, Herbert Sawyer. If you can, you'll do more than that. This second murder happened

just a few streets over. You stay out of this."

"I'm surprised you treat me like this," I said, almost smirking. I walked up to him, knowing that at any moment he might reach out and cuff me, take me down a few notches. Maybe the bruises on my face deterred him. Or maybe it was something else, because he just kind of studied me for a few seconds. "Don't you know what they call me at school now?" I tossed the rag on the bench. "'Death Kid.' How do you like that?"

"I can't talk about either of these cases, Herbie; you know that."

"Then come in the house with me and let me talk to you."

"So I'm in the library yesterday, figuring I'll go ahead and get started on my history project." I shrugged as I poured Jake a mug of coffee from the coffee maker. "I mean, what else have I got to do?" I handed him the mug and started to make myself one, too. "Anyhow, while I was there I got distracted by the newspapers. They have them all spread out, you know, in the reading section."

Which was set some distance from the research area, which Jake probably knew, but that didn't matter. I never had to explain anymore to Jake. It hadn't taken long for Mrs. Shore, the research librarian, to notice me, but instead of asking what I was doing in the town library . . .

"This case reminds me of Natalie Booker."

She hadn't started in by demanding what I was doing there at ten A.M. on a school morning, but that should hardly have surprised me. Mrs. Shore was just about the most upbeat adult I knew. Friendly, pleasant, never one to focus on the negative side of anyone or anything, she just looked down at the newspapers I had spread out in front of me and made that comment straight out of the air. And if that hadn't been enough, she added this, too: "He placed her—" She nodded at the paper in front of me. "—just like Natalie."

It takes a lot to startle me, but I was startled; I could barely blurt out, "Placed?"

"In a riding paddock."

"But the girl who was killed last spring was found in a ball field. The papers don't say—" I looked down at the paper, then back up at her. "—anything about a riding paddock, or a Nata . . ."

"Of course not. That was six years ago. Too much time in-between to draw a connection."

"Natalie . . ."

"Yes. Alice and I talked about it. Alice Angless. She discovered the body last Saturday night in her yard."

So straightforward, so matter-of-fact, and so unemotional until one looked into her deep, dark brown eyes. Mrs. Barbara Shore was one of those middle-aged women whose exact age was ultimately unimportant. She could have been anywhere from forty

to sixty-five, but she seemed—and this is strange for a kid to admit—ageless. I'd known her since fifth grade, when she'd been the school librarian at South Manamesset Elementary. Now here she was, still working for the town and still staring down at me with the same expectations she'd have had for anyone who walked through the front doors: I'm here to help, yes, but you're here to tell me how I can help.

"You *know* the lady in whose yard—"

"Of course I do. This is a small town, Herbie, which is the problem sometimes, isn't it? Nothing travels faster in a town this size than gossip and rumors, and those can be rife with misinformation."

"Alice Angless found the dead girl. She called the police." Then I realized what Mrs. Shore had said. "When you say 'placed,' do you mean the way they were positioned? Or are you talking about—"

Cut off again, this time by a smiling librarian: "Do you know what a primary source is?"

"You're not telling me to . . ."

"You're a smart boy. You have an intuition—some might call it an insight—that most of us don't. No, of course I'm not telling you to get involved. It's got nothing to do with you."

I thought of my mother. "Or everything," I murmured.

I looked back up at Jake; he was swirling his spoon around and around in his coffee.

“Mrs. Shore told me that six years ago Natalie Booker was found dead on her farm, out on the outer Cape, in a horse paddock.” I joined him at the table, hot mug in my hands, and studied Jake’s sober face. “She was going to find and copy the story for me, but my mother showed up and . . .” And I had had to shove all the papers under some magazines and pretend I’d been working on history. “Well, I had to go. I had work here to—” I looked across the kitchen and into the adjoining living room. Four large boxes sat there. “—finish.”

“I remember that one,” Jake said, almost thoughtfully, though the look in his eyes was doubtful. Still, this was apparently one case he could talk about. “Attractive woman, raised thoroughbred horses. Forty years old, found dead in a training corral. Her husband was accused of strangling her, but he escaped out the back of a police wagon on the way to Bridgewater State. Thomas Booker, if I remember correctly. He turned up a few months later working out of Newport on his brother’s fishing boat. He was caught again and brought back to jail where he—” Jake set his mug down. I knew the expression; here came the clincher, the point at which he’d try to startle, scare, or alarm little Herbie Sawyer. It might have worked a few years ago. “—tied his sheets up into a noose his first night in jail and hung himself from the top bars of his cell.”

But it no longer worked. Even

as he raised his bright blue eyes to mine, waiting for my reaction, I gave him nothing. I just raised my mug to my lips, studied him over the rim. It was hazelnut mocha with a touch of vanilla, my favorite.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “That’s exactly how Mrs. Shore remembered it.”

“Those research librarians. A head for facts and they forget nothing. What else did she tell you?”

“That all three victims were placed . . .”

“Yes, like they were sleeping. That’s nothing new. Been in the papers, though I don’t remember how Natalie Booker’s body was found. Still, it’s too far-fetched, Herbie.” He frowned. “Booker was murdered by her husband, who did us the favor of killing himself in jail, but don’t ever quote me on that.” He sighed, stretched a bit, then leaning over the table, said, “Okay, I admit, there are few leads in either this recent murder or Donna Holcomber’s. Holcomber was a quiet girl who dropped out of school at sixteen. She lived at home with her parents, had few friends, and no boyfriend that we could find. She didn’t work. She might even have been called, politely, retarded. She walked her dog; she baby-sat on Fridays for neighbors. She was last seen by her parents on a Saturday night as she left the house to walk to the corner store for a quart of milk.” He leaned in closer toward me, clasping his large hands together. “Herbie, she didn’t even drive.”

“Yeah, that’s all in the papers. But what about this recent one?”

“No ID yet. A lot of inquiries, though, from anxious parents, desperate boyfriends, that sort of thing. She seems to be in her late teens or early twenties; no identifying marks, tattoos, nothing. No signs of sexual . . .” He grew uncomfortable and sat back suddenly, nearly knocking the chair against the wall. “She was wearing a short green dress and a dark windbreaker. No jewelry. But she was a fairly attractive girl. Just a matter of time before we identify her.”

“No connection to the Holcomber girl?”

He suddenly refolded his hands on the table, then lifted them up and under his chin. “We’re looking into that now with help from the state and the D.A.’s office, of course. But so far, nothing. Once we ID this second girl we’ll start looking for mutual friends or acquaintances, anything the two girls might have had in common.”

“Forensics?”

“Nothing substantial yet. Some hairs, some fiber evidence, but still nothing that connects them together.”

“Drugs or alcohol?”

He shook his head. “Clean, the both of them.”

“Computer?”

“Holcomber? No, didn’t own one and according to her parents wouldn’t have known how to operate one if she did. She quietly dropped out of school, and it seems, out of any social life she had when she was a junior.”

“It’s unusual, you know,” I said to him. “Even the kids who are . . . slow, graduate nowadays.”

“I plan to revisit the Holcombers myself, but . . .” His eyes lifted to mine. “I appreciate your listening to me. You do help me sort out things, Herbie, sort of an untrained eye.”

I lifted my coffee mug. “That a compliment, Jake, or an insult?”

He wouldn’t answer that, said instead: “I will go back through the Booker files. I just think Mrs. Shore is trying too hard to make connections and do a Miss Marple-type thing. The Booker case was closed when Tom Booker killed himself. But . . .”

He was thinking, and perhaps remembering. Even though Natalie Booker had been killed on the outer Cape six years ago, if—as Mrs. Shore had put it—she had been placed in the same position as either Donna Holcomber or this recent victim, then he had to look into it. Any possible connection, no matter how remote, would not go overlooked by Jake Valari.

“Okay, and it also might be a good idea to check any other unsolved cases you got—” I got up; my coffee needed more sugar. “—involving bodies placed . . .” Mrs. Shore had never explained exactly what she’d meant by *placed*. “Damn, Jake. I got a funny feeling all of a sudden.”

Why did I think of my mother just then and the two letters I’d found? I looked toward the back door; there was no one there. I turned back to Jake. “It’s like

they're sleeping. Hey, Jake, is it possible that whoever killed them . . . felt sorry later?"

Jake pursed his lips together tightly, shook his head. Apparently that wasn't even worth considering.

"You don't think so because of how they were killed. Tell me, Jake. You know you can trust me. Do you know what was used to strangle them?"

"There's been no fiber evidence in the wounds on the neck, but there was a depression on the side of her neck made from a surgeon's knot, or so it looks. So we're thinking monofilament fishing line."

I understood; a surgeon's knot was often used to tie two types of fishing line together. Despite the name, it was a common fisherman's knot.

"Yeah," Jake said with a nod. "Maybe the killer is a fisherman."

Maybe I am wrong sometimes, but not this time. When I stepped back into the kitchen later that day, after carrying six more boxes to the garage and bagging up about ten cartons of stuff that was already out there, I found my mother leaning on the kitchen counter, the latest edition of the *Courier-Times* under her elbows. Immediately she swept it aside, folding it up as she did. Then she turned her eyes on me.

Maybe I better just quit trying to figure her out. No doubt she was very upset about these recent murders, but she had more than the usual reasons for being

that way. She was looking at her son, a kid who had gotten the name Death Kid because he sometimes got involved in situations just like this. So, maybe the best thing he could do now was convince her how uninterested and unaffected he was by the whole thing.

But he—I—couldn't hide his interest for long. My eyes fell down on the headlines partially obscured by her elbow: "No Arrest Imminent in Strangulation."

"You get everything done?" she asked. Her eyes were heavy and dark, like she hadn't slept in days.

I tried to be upbeat: "All done. Every box. All ready to go out on Satur—"

"I want you to clean the garage tomorrow."

I was caught off guard again: "But trash pickup is Saturday. Let me clean it out then, after all the boxes are gone."

"Do it tomorrow. I want the floor swept and washed clean. And the windows, too. They could also use some caulking." She looked down at the folded newspaper in her hands. She was trembling.

"Mom, tomorrow is Wednesday. We got a good ten, twelve boxes out there. I'll have to drag them all out to clean the floor and then drag them back in again." God, I was trying too hard to explain.

"You can't do this one little thing for me?" she demanded, whipping her head up. "Do I ask so much, Herbie? Do I?"

"No." I swallowed, rather deeply because if I didn't do something

with my tongue I was going to lash out at her. "You don't."

"Then clean the garage tomorrow. You're young and strong. So carry the boxes out and then carry them back in again." She reached under the counter, shoved the crumpled newspaper into the wastebasket, and walked into the living room.

Okay, so I'm drawn to places like this, but I figured a little look-see wasn't going to hurt, or even help, anything. Maybe I did deserve my nickname, macabre as it was. (And truth was, only a handful of kids, four or five—six at most—called me by that stupid name.)

Anyhow, I had to see . . .

"Who are you? And what are you doing in my yard?"

I didn't step toward her; I just stood completely still. You never know how you appear to other people, and though I think I'm the most non-threatening-looking soul on the face of the earth, that is only my opinion. For the woman in the doorway, the screen door held protectively to her chest, I was a teenaged kid with a beat-up face. Far as she knew, I was the killer.

"I live over on Bayview. I . . ." I looked down at the ragged pieces of yellow police tape that had marked the crime scene. They were broken now; the wind and rain of the last few nights had probably ruined any value the location still contained.

"And?" Her voice was high and sharp and shrill with either fear

or excitement. She was probably about the same age as Mrs. Shore, but she held herself differently than the research librarian. She was tall and her carriage very stiff, very erect. I don't know how I could tell, but I knew that Mrs. Alice Angless was a woman who had once hunted and fished, wielding both gun and rod as capably as any man. The door was now thrust open, and cane in hand, she stepped cautiously out onto her front step and glared at me.

"I just came to see—"

"Where the poor girl was laid out? Is that what you're here for? Well, look, then, and get off my property. You should be ashamed of yourself. A boy your age should be in school."

"Mrs. Shore sent me," I lied, cutting her off, which was a rude thing to do, but it worked. "And I'm not in school because I had an accident." Okay, another lie, but it was better than the truth.

"You know Barbara Shore?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry I'm trespassing—"

She cut me off sharply. "She wasn't killed here. Even the police, incompetent as they are, could tell that. She was *placed* there, with her hands under her head like a pillow, like an angel, like a little child going to sleep. They didn't put it quite that way in the paper, but that's how she was laid, over there in my yard." She came away from her door and with her black wooden cane pointed straight ahead to a spot in the side yard. "It was raining

that night and I was inside thinking how glad I was that I'd just gotten the roof fixed." Her eyes bore right down on me. "You better not be lying to me, young man. One phone call and I can find out if you are."

"I'm not lying. I do live over on . . ."

"Not about that!" she snapped. "About Barbara Shore sending you to see me!" She walked right up to me then, and sixteen years old or sixty, I knew she could—and would—have taken my head off with that cane if she thought I was the least bit of a threat to her. I've been up against some pretty tough characters, including a few who would have liked to kill me, but none frightened me like this woman. Forget what I said about my looking threatening to her; suddenly our roles had tipped upside-down, reversing themselves.

"No, ma'am. I'm . . . my name is Herbert Sawyer, and I . . . okay, she didn't send me here, but I do know Mrs. Shore, and the truth is, she said she knew you and—"

"And it's a curse to be so curious, isn't it? Death calls and you have to come running."

"I wouldn't put it quite . . ." Now she was starting to make me uneasy. I stepped over the tattered remnants of police tape, then into her side yard and toward the massive white oak tree. The paper had gotten this wrong, too. It wasn't in her front yard, but on the side where she had a little storage shed, some redwood patio furniture piled on its side, cushions

removed. A boat trailer sat between the house and shed, and out in back where her yard backed up to a wooded area, I could see a half-dozen metal lobster traps and buoys sitting on the ground.

"Curious, and rude," she said, following me. "Because the proper thing would have been to call me first and warn me you were coming. But Barbara did say you weren't always an overly polite boy."

"Mrs. Shore mentioned me?"

"Or very truthful. You got those marks in a fight, didn't you? Over a girl." She smiled triumphantly at me. "I had my share of boys fight over me, too. In my day I was considered quite the catch."

Suddenly I knew there'd be no point in either lying, or stretching the truth, with this woman, and just as I was about to explain and defend myself, she pointed down at the ground with her cane.

"Right there she was, in the center of those ugly things."

"Center of . . ." I turned, moving as though I were in slow motion. But I saw them. There were mushrooms everywhere. Brown and rotting, most were little more than tipped-over stumps of mush. I stooped down carefully at the edge of them, looked across her yard and saw it. "The mushrooms are in a circle."

"A damned fairy ring. I had my son mow right over them, but up they pop again. Ugly things."

"You said she was laid . . . where?" I looked up at her.

"Right there." She pointed with

her cane almost angrily. "Poor, sad thing, on her right side, kind of curled up in the middle of them, and not a one touched, by the looks of it. Not when I found her, that is." She glared at me. "He did a fine job on her, too, neck all cut up. Strangled, by the looks; it was horrible." She shivered and then, cane not an inch before my face, said, "There are two more of those damned rings, white ones and orange, and more out back, and ugly big puffballs, and over there on my oaks are some of those white ones that grow on trees. Horrible, horrible, with all this damp weather, they pop up everywhere."

"And did you hear anything that night, Mrs. Angless?"

"It was windy and it was raining, but then it was still. If anything, it was quieter than normal. No, of course I didn't hear anything. I'd have been out here with my husband's shotgun, wouldn't I? And blown his head off?"

"And she was in the center of—you called it a fairy ring?" I stood up slowly and stepped back. This was her ground, her home and yard that had been desecrated. I wanted to be careful and respectful of that. I wondered if the police officers who had questioned her had been as careful. Or as respectful.

"Do you think that might be important? The police didn't think so, not at all. In fact, they weren't very interested in anything I had to tell them. Out here with their little plastic bags and their police tape." She put her

hand, wrinkled and blue-veined, but strong-looking, to her throat. Then a pair of vivid and surprisingly youthful-looking blue eyes met mine.

"You never know," I shrugged, "what might be important." A truthful statement if ever I'd spoken one.

Suddenly she relaxed, exhaled slowly, and said: "Every time I step out my door I see her lying there, poor thing. Twenty if she were a day, and they still don't know who she was, with her neck all torn up like that." She waved a hand in the air. It was obvious to me then that she wanted to talk. The police had probably been kind but professional and had quickly dismissed her when they realized she could add little by way of information into their investigation.

"How was it . . . torn up, Mrs. Angless?"

She studied me silently for a moment, then said, "Like something had been wound around and around it. Barbara and I talked about this, and about that other girl last spring, found at the ball park."

"And another woman? Six years ago?"

"The police were very condescending." And she had wanted to talk. "They took my statement, then told me to go back into the house while they 'took care of things.'"

"Yeah, sometimes they can be . . . condescending," I agreed.

Her eyes tightened. "Even so, this is a job for the police."

Of course she was right; I shouldn't be here. So for a moment I stood there like a fool, wondering what I was doing there anyhow at another small house among a row of bigger ones, most of them empty this time of year, deserted by their temporary occupants. Then I said, not even knowing why, "When I was twelve I found the body of a woman in a marsh and ever since . . ."

"That's exactly what Barbara said," she said. "Ever since. Come into my house and we'll talk some more."

"I can't take the credit for anything you've heard, Mrs. Angless," I told her, trying my best to look, sound, and behave entirely credible. "People exaggerate."

She set a small china cup of hot tea down in front of me. "Nonsense, you're drawn to this, don't deny it. I don't know that much about you, just what the people around here talk about, and talk about it they do. A little here, a little there, but it all amounts to the same thing: You have a sense for things, or a talent, and it would be a shame to waste it—or neglect it."

Suddenly I felt terribly uncomfortable. "Mrs. Angless, I don't plan to . . ." I moved to go and the old woman clamped her hand down over my wrist, effectively holding me there at her kitchen table.

"You're modest, too, or so they say. Doing things, uncovering information, facts and evidence that later the police—at your own in-

sistence—take credit for. Is that true?"

"Look, Mrs. Angless, maybe once or twice, I . . ." I met her eyes; they were just like Emma's.

"When I was twenty I was thrown from a horse. I broke my leg in three places. I was in a state park in the middle of nowhere, but a young man who was fishing nearby came and set my leg and stayed with me until medical help could arrive. I knew the moment he touched me he was a natural healer, and I told him so. He laughed at me, but I was right. The next time I encountered that young man, they were wheeling my son in for an emergency appendectomy."

"Mrs. Angless . . ." I tried to protest.

"You are here for a reason, and that reason is to find out who did this, and not for yourself, but because it is what you do, and who you are. I can't see yet what you will be . . ." Her eyes, focused on mine, seemed to look right into me. "An investigator of some sort? A lawyer, perhaps? A scientist or . . . no, you can't be focused so narrowly; your perspective covers too broad a spectrum. You see it all, don't you?"

"Mrs. Angless," I confessed, "I don't know *what* I see. I don't even know why I'm here today." I met her piercing, unblinking eyes. "I just . . . see things . . . differently sometimes."

"And what did you see out in my yard just now?"

"Leaves and grass, and a lot of smashed mushrooms." I paused

and took a deep breath. "I guess the police didn't miss much. They probably took samples of everything."

"Grass and soil and twigs, yes. They want to know what he left with her, what the killer brought here, fibers and hairs and fingerprints, isn't that it? I watch the crime shows. I know a few things. But I should wonder at something else if I were the police. I would wonder why she was left in *my* yard." Her eyes grew misty for a moment. "I thought at first that she was just lying there asleep on the wet ground." Then she said, belligerently and bitterly, "But even with your ability, the police won't let you see her, will they?"

"Probably not. Once in a while I help a little, come up with some—" I shrugged. "—information."

"Information?" she exclaimed. "Insight! If they're going to solve this thing and find the killer, they're going to need anybody's help who *can* help, aren't they?" She leaned toward me, once more locking her vivid blue eyes with mine.

I shivered, suddenly feeling cold again, just as I had back in my own kitchen when I'd thought my mother had come home unexpectedly. "I guess I never thought of it that way."

WEDNESDAY, DAY THREE . . .

So maybe both Mrs. Angless and Mrs. Shore enjoyed playing sidekick to a kid with a penchant for getting in over his head. May-

be they were just eager to relive their youth, or middle age, or maybe they honestly saw something in me that I had for too long denied. I couldn't help the fact that sometimes I did stumble into things, and unlike most people, I don't shy away from that which scares me. Too often I run headfirst into situations I should ignore, dismiss, or turn over to someone like . . .

Well, like Jake. Because I had no business doing this. I hadn't known this poor dead girl—the image of whom Mrs. Angless had painted so graphically in my head—and neither had I any justifiable reason for doing what I did next. I couldn't even justify it on the basis of my mother's moods because . . .

Because I still wasn't a hundred percent sure what—or who—was responsible for that.

I figured my mother would be at work all day, and if I got back early, I'd still have plenty of time to clean the garage. So, grabbing a soda and a fistful of cookies to see me through, I took off on my bike.

"This is all I could find in the local papers. I'll get you the *Globe* and the *Herald* when you're done. I thought you might like to read the local stories first." Mrs. Shore leaned over my shoulder to adjust the focus on the microfiche machine. Scrolling through the pages there, she stopped at "Owner of Champion Thoroughbreds Found Murdered."

I was uncomfortable and

vaguely uncertain of my ability to be what Mrs. Angless, and even Mrs. Shore, seemed so sure I was. So I justified my actions by thinking of myself as merely an interested and concerned bystander. Surely others had done this before me, the so-called armchair detectives of the world, those who have the need to go beyond the story presented to the public by the media. I was just a curious kid with time on my hands.

So I sat and I read the details of Natalie Booker's death six years before. I learned just about nothing, even after Mrs. Shore brought me the follow-up articles that came out weeks, even months later. She and her husband, Thomas, had a history of domestic disputes, with the police being called to Booker Farms By the Bay, overlooking historic Westfleet Bay, more than a dozen times in the two years before she was murdered. Every time it had been the same, Mrs. Booker preferred not to press charges, and with no obvious signs of physical abuse—no bruises, cuts, black eyes, and so on—the police had had no choice but to read Thomas Booker the riot act and leave.

Then, on May 18, Natalie Booker was found dead, strangled, in the training paddock where she worked with her champion Tennessee Walking horse, King Sprite. Subsequent investigations led to Thomas Booker's arrest, from which—as Jake had informed me—he escaped on his way to Bridgewater for "observation." Later he was picked up as

he left his brother's fishing boat, the *Alvin Grover*, which sailed out of New Bedford. That same night Thomas Booker hanged himself from the bars of his cell.

"I don't get it," I said to myself about an hour later. "There's nothing here. She was laid down kind of like the Holcomber girl and this other girl..." I didn't realize I was talking out loud to myself, but suddenly a voice said to me:

"It's more than that. A lot more." Mrs. Shore pulled out a chair to sit next to me. I don't think I'd ever seen this lady sit; she was always standing, moving around the library like a whirlwind, answering questions, and climbing ladders to reach high shelves of reference volumes.

"Natalie Booker's killer is dead. I don't see the connection," I told Mrs. Shore pointedly.

"Where were they placed, Herbie? Oh, and don't think Alice and I haven't tried to tell the police our ideas."

"In a paddock." I pointed to the microfiche, now on a story from the *Boston Herald*. "And a ball field, and under an oak tree." Still, no connection.

"Not just under an oak tree," she said, moving her chair closer to mine. "But in a ring of mushroomrooms. Alice called the police herself and asked if they were checking on that connection, that all three bodies were found placed within some kind of enclosure."

"Enclosure?" Boy, she was really stretching it. Maybe some old-

er women want to be Miss Marple too badly. "Okay, a corral and a ball field, I guess." If I remembered correctly, there was no fence around War Memorial Park. "But a ring of mushrooms?"

"Undisturbed mushrooms. Alice says the killer had to have been very careful not to step on a single one."

"And was she as careful?"

Mrs. Shore sat back from me, gave a hot, hard sigh. "No. Alice did . . . crush a few, but that was before she realized—"

"Realized nothing, Mrs. Shore. Come on, with all due respect, we're pushing it here. A paddock is a man-made enclosure, all fenced in. But the ball field? There's no fence around the park, just a backstop behind home base, that is unless you want to count the lines painted on the grass? For crying out loud, that's far-fetched even for—"

She interrupted: "Maybe there is a symbolic reason for putting the body inside some sort of ring! Maybe the killer is a . . . witch or warlock, or has some pagan religious beliefs, or . . ."

"Or this is all very interesting, but getting us nowhere. Mrs. Angless was right. This is a job for the police." I reached around the microfiche and flicked the off switch. "Thanks, but I'm going home. I've got a garage to clean out."

I looked, but didn't find any more letters in blue envelopes. I went through every box before I lugged them out into the damp

autumn air. Then I swept out the garage, washed the floor, caulked the windows—and why I had to do that, I had no idea; we didn't live in the garage. Then I dragged each box back in, ending with a crate of magazines from '83 and '84. *National Geographic* they were, with features on volcanoes, glaciers, the blue whale, and Ireland. Ireland.

I sat down on a box of *Popular Mechanics* and started flipping through an issue focusing on the Republic of Ireland. Land of enchantment. The Green Isle. Poets and playwrights. Dublin. Kissing the Blarney stone. Leprechauns and elves and fairies.

I hate to admit, but it was pretty absorbing reading, despite the obvious slant to the popular, and so much so that I didn't notice Jake come in. Maybe he thought I'd heard him or his car because he just said all of a sudden: "How is she today, Herbie?"

I nearly jumped a foot.

"Okay, I guess," I said. "She's not home yet. Hey . . ." I noticed the glum tone in his voice, the serious set of his closely spaced eyes. "Anything new, I mean, in this investigation?"

"I took your suggestion, did some research. I found another one." He put a foot up on a crate of books and stared hard at me.

"Another one?"

"There's a new database just coming online, Herbie, not that complete yet; it's for all the New England states. Hey, you know me and computers." He made a grim face, shrugged. "Would have

talked about this with the chief, but he's out of state this week at a conference down in Alabama. Anyhow, there are no matches for Cape Cod, or the state of Massachusetts, no active cases that is, that match any of the characteristics of our two murders, but . . ."

Our two murders. It gave me a little thrill to hear him refer to it that way, and then a chill. I swallowed and waited, understanding what he was talking about.

"But I did find one that matched somewhat, up in Maine. Unidentified girl found in a meadow, actually a cow pasture, about a year ago. Lying on her side, her hands tucked under her head. A group of hikers came across her and thought she was asleep at first. She had six feet of fishing line wrapped around her neck."

"Cow pasture," I murmured. "Fenced-in cow pasture?"

"Probably stone walls," he said kind of halfheartedly, but then his head jerked up. "That important?"

"Probably not. No ID?"

He shook his head. "I contacted the Cumberland County Sheriff's Department up there. I expect a call back some time this afternoon. I don't have a lot of details yet; still it seems a long shot, at best."

"Have you talked to the Holcombers yet?"

"Going there this afternoon. Just stopped by to check on your mother."

"Let me go with you."

"Herbie . . ." He shook his head

adamantly. "The parents were never very happy with the authorities, including me and my department. They just want to be left alone. So they won't be glad to see me, let alone—"

"I'll tell them I went to school with her."

"Which will be a lie."

"And maybe they'll tell me something that they won't tell you."

"You're one cocky son-of-a—"

"You got two murders, Jake, maybe three—maybe four, now." I glanced down at the magazine rolled in my hands. What had I just been reading? What made me pause, think, try to remember? And why was it that sometimes you can't remember what you were doing, less than five minutes earlier? "Just bring me along, Jake. If they don't want to see me, I'll sit in the car."

"You know, I was eight, maybe nine years old when Natalie Booker was killed," I told him as we drove out to South Manamesset, the working-class section of town, where most of the houses were year-round residences, small Capes and converted farmhouses, with postage stamp-sized yards. "So I don't remember the details."

"I only know what I read; I wasn't part of it. Most we were asked to do was be on the lookout for Tom Booker, or his brother Nathan, I think his name was, or Ned. Some 'N' name." He shrugged. "It had all the makings of a quickly resolved case. Tom

Booker got picked up, then he got away, then he got caught again."

"Did he ever confess?"

"Don't know. Don't think so. I haven't looked up all the particulars of that case." He gave me a sidelong glance. "It's not an active case, Herbie. It's closed. Done with. Maybe the guy we're looking for heard about the Booker murder and is copying it, or maybe it's just coincidence that the bodies have all been treated in the same way."

"It's a weird thing, you know," I said, dropping my head back against the seat, "thinking about some guy murdering some girl. I can't imagine it, not really, even though I've seen a hundred or so fake murders on TV. But then, to think—~~he would position the body . . .~~" I shook my head. "Something's there, Jake, something right there on the edge of . . . like I can't quite see it, something's blocking my view. Ever had that feeling? That if you could just get to the other side of things, you'd see what everyone else is looking right at, but not seeing?"

"I feel that way about your mother."

"Heck, Jake," I protested. "What has my mother got to do with any of this?"

"She's trying to tell us something, and we're too blind to see it."

"My mother is trying to tell us something? Yeah, that she's scared nuts by these murders."

"You think so?"

"I find her alone sometimes listening to long, dreary music, op-

era stuff, most of it. She sits in the dark and won't talk to me. Then I find her reading about these murders and stuffing the papers in the trash, so I won't see them. Yeah," I nodded. "I think she's scared."

Jake was right. Mr. and Mrs. Holcomber weren't happy to see him; me they barely noticed. Both parents were older, grim faced. The father launched immediately into a series of questions and demands Jake was hard put to answer: "Why are you here now? Do you have any new information for us? Why hasn't the chief called us in four weeks? What do you mean the chief is out of town? Why isn't he working on this case round the clock until Donna's killer is found? Have you any idea what we've been through the last four months? Of course we don't have any new information *for you*—you're supposed to be finding out who did this for us!" And then more and more of the same, including: "I hope to God you never experience what we have. It's a living nightmare. Never ending. And now with this other girl dead, the reporters won't leave us alone. They say there's a connection, that it's probably the same guy. What do the police think? Don't you know who she is by now? Why aren't you people out doing your jobs instead of bothering us like this?"

Mr. Holcomber didn't even ask us into the house, just kept us standing there on his back porch

jabbering away at Jake. But to give Jake credit, he was polite and asked few questions in return; he just tried to respond as well and as sympathetically as he could. So it was in the middle of all this haranguing that I stepped forward and asked Mrs. Holcomber, a small, sad-faced woman standing just behind her husband, "Could I see Donna's room? I went to school with her."

Mr. Holcomber was so set on attacking Jake, his department, his department's incompetence, that he barely noticed me.

And maybe Mrs. Holcomber was so startled by my request that she nodded and took me into the house without a word.

It was a small, neat, pink and white room, with a bed still made up fresh, clean white curtains, and a dresser covered with small porcelain figures. There was another bureau with a mirror and some makeup on it.

"Donna was a very good girl, a very simple girl," is how Mrs. Holcomber put it as I entered her daughter's room.

So I might have overlooked the obvious, just as I suppose the police did. I didn't touch anything. It was only a matter of time before Mr. Holcomber realized where we were and came tearing up here to throw me out. The room was, though, more than small and simple, clean and orderly. It was boring. No diary, I asked the mother, no notebooks, no computer, not even a phone? None, she told me. Donna had no boyfriends; in fact,

she had no real friends, she said sadly, except her parents. Donna was a good girl, but "simple," and then she said, with great reluctance, "and slow."

Yeah, I might have walked right past it, but somewhere, somehow, my brain was frantically trying to link up the loose ends of what seemed like separate pieces of . . . something. So it was probably that part of me that made me walk over to Donna Holcomber's dresser, pick up one of the porcelain figurines. It was an elf or some sort of fairy, perhaps. It had lacy delicate wings and a doll-like face and looked hand-crafted.

"Donna's pixie collection," her mother told me, a slight lift in her voice. I said nothing, turned the figurine over in my hands. "She started collecting . . . oh, not long before . . ." Her pale, moist eyes caught mine.

"They look expensive," I commented.

"I don't know. There's a shop in town." She turned away then, wringing her hands.

But they did look expensive and Donna had ten of them.

"She buy them with her own money?"

Mrs. Holcomber turned back, startled, not at my question, but at me, this strange kid in her daughter's bedroom, holding what must have been a prized possession of hers. But then, almost hopefully, she answered, "Donna had no money, except what she got baby-sitting. Pocket change. Oh, she was planning to

get a real job. She just hadn't started looking yet."

"So these aren't gifts from someone else?"

"Gifts?" Her whole face distorted; she was seconds away from tears. "From who? No, Donna, she bought them with her own money."

I set the figurine down gently. I'd heard the voices from below, knew that Mr. Holcomber was already on his way up here. And he practically threw himself into his daughter's room and demanded that both Jake and I get the hell out of his house.

"Not in the report, not in any of them," Jake told me from his desk. He closed the manila folder in his hand. "You said she had ten of them?"

"And not bought in town, Jake. I turned one over. It said the Fantasy Shoppe, Falmouth. I think it's in a strip mall out near Old Silver Beach. If Donna Holcomber bought them there, or if someone bought them for her, there might be a record, especially if someone used a credit card or a check."

"And if someone else bought them, then maybe Donna Holcomber did have a friend or a boyfriend. But her parents have denied all along..."

"Maybe they didn't know. Maybe they didn't want to know."

"We need to take a trip to the Fantasy Shoppe."

They were one-of-a-kind porcelain figurines out of a collection

called "Ireland's Pixies" and very popular with those in the "fairy-fantasy set," as the proprietor of the store, a sweet-faced young woman with an intriguing Irish lilt, informed us. Each sold for upwards of a hundred dollars.

"Mostly middle-aged women buy them for themselves, or their children, grandchildren, that sort of thing," she happily told Jake and me as she worked on a new window display of gnomes and elves for Halloween. "Very sweet they are. Look at their faces." She handed me a ghoulish-looking gnome, smiling as she did. "The same lady makes them all, you see. Oh, but he's not so pretty, is he, not like the fairies, or as we call them, the pixies. But very expressive, each one has its own identity."

As helpful as she was, she had no written record of ten pixies being sold to a single purchaser, not within the last year. Of course I'd turned over only one figurine; it was very possible they'd been bought in different stores at different times. Jake was thinking along the same lines as me, because he asked, "So you have no record of anyone coming in, say, last April or May, picking up ten at one time, or over a period of a few weeks, the same buyer..."

The young woman was at her records now, working off a computer in an office at the back of the shop.

"Well, I did sell one a week, for about five, no, six weeks, to the same gentleman." She looked up at Jake, smiling attractively, then

her inquisitive eyes turned on me. What was she wondering about? Why was I banged-up? Why wasn't I in school? Jake had identified himself as a police detective, but just who was I? She leaned away so Jake could look over her shoulder at the computer monitor. "Do you see? I do keep very good sales records. April three through to the middle of May, one pixie sold every Friday in the morning. That code," she tapped the screen with the eraser end of a pencil, "indicates the transaction was done in cash."

"Cash," Jake murmured; he was already reaching for his cell phone. "The figurines all have names, or numbers, right?"

"Oh, they have names, for sure," she said helpfully. "I can tell you exactly which ones he bought." She started tapping keys, chattering away as she did. "And a nice enough gentleman he was, I remember him quite well. Very good-looking." A glance at me. "Very tall, dark eyes and hair, told me the pixies were for his sweetheart. Oh, so much in love he seemed. Came in once a week, he did, and then he just stopped coming."

"Just stopped?"

"Oh and he was ever so into the whole mythology, you know. Leprechauns and lucky charms, well, there are those who take it for what it is, a fantasy. But this fellow, well, he all but said he saw them himself, flitting about the fairy glens, you know."

I watched as Jake moved away; I knew what he was doing, get-

ting someone to go back out to the Holcombers', take the names or identification numbers off the figurines in Donna Holcomber's bedroom.

I turned back to the highly personable young woman. "What are you saying? That some people actually believe that there are—"

"Fairies, oh of course. You can find whole websites of them. Just like there are those who truly believe there are vampires and such." She shuddered. "At least believing in fairies is a harmless thing, isn't it? Most who collect do it for the lark of it, but then there are those like this fellow," a nod to the monitor, "who believe in them wholly and truly."

"Puts a whole new spin on things," Jake muttered as he pulled himself into his car. "Six of the pixie figurines came from here and were paid for in cash. Her records indicate they were bought on six Fridays in a row, starting April third. The other four came from some place else, so Donna Holcomber was lying when she told her mother that she had bought them. She didn't have the money or the means." He looked at me. "She didn't drive. She didn't have a real job, but it suddenly does look like she had an admirer."

"But how . . . when . . ." But even I, at all of fifteen, knew the answer. It was the oldest trick in the book, one practiced and widely bragged about by girls at school who were even younger than me. "She snuck out and her

parents never knew. They're older, maybe went to bed early. She just . . ."

"Yeah," Jake agreed. "I think you're right."

So it came to me later, though I refused to believe it at first. My mother was sitting in her room, this time as some New Age music was droning on, and I was sitting on my bed among history books, recent newspapers and photocopies of old newspapers, and two blue-enveloped letters. For a while things were just spinning around and around, sort of confusedly. Then, ignoring the time, I got up, went out to the garage, found what I was looking for, and came back in.

Then I looked up her phone number, wondering if it was just another long shot that she'd still be awake, and gave her a ring. Strangely enough, she was up and working on inventory in her shop. "We're going to do a wonderful business with Halloween and then Christmas coming," the pretty lady with the Irish lilt told me, apparently thrilled to have a fifteen-year-old kid call her at ten past midnight.

But she answered all my questions; in fact, she turned out to be pretty knowledgeable. Then, putting that information aside—along with my long-neglected history project—I went online for a few hours before going to bed. I had a few things to do tomorrow.

THURSDAY, DAY FOUR . . .

"You want to see . . . who?" The

woman at the tattered screen door held it protectively in front of her, but I knew it wasn't latched. I also knew that it would have been a poor shield had I been damaged, or worse; I could have torn it from her frail grip in seconds.

But I suppose I did look pretty bad with my beat-up face with the black eye, and the cuts and scrapes that Covey had given me. Still, I had a purpose for being there.

"Mr. Hardy. I want to see him, if he's home. He is the groundskeeper at War Memorial Park, right?" I clenched the newspaper in my fist. Mr. Eugene Hardy had been questioned by the police the day after Donna Holcomber's body had been discovered, but not because he had found her. An early-morning jogger had found Donna in the ball field. It's just that I had a question for Mr. Hardy that perhaps only he could answer. He hadn't been hard to find; there was only one Eugene Hardy in the Manamesset phone book.

Her answer stunned me: "I'm Mrs. Hardy, young man. My husband passed away in August. Heart attack in his sleep."

"Damn," I murmured. Suddenly the woman was pulling the door closed, moving to shut the interior door.

"Wait!" She paused, but she was pretty uncertain about me. Like I said, I'm not big, and not very threatening, not by the standards of kids my age, but by hers I was like a wolf at the door. "Wait," I said more gently. "Please, Mrs.

Hardy, I'm sorry about your husband's death, but maybe you can help me. Did he have . . . I mean, this might not be important, but did he have any assistants, or co-workers? It's just that I have a question I have to ask about the ball field. I was just out there now and it looks perfect. The grass is still green and . . ."

"He was proud of that field," she said, easing up a bit.

"Donna Holcomber was found dead in that . . ."

Now the door came forward and she was scampering back around it like a frightened mouse.

"Mrs. Hardy, please . . ." One more attempt, and I took a chance. It occurred to me that if a man did have a problem at work—that kind of a problem—he might bring it home to puzzle over and discuss with his wife, so before she could shut the interior door on me, I blurted it out.

And got exactly the answer I expected.

Jake's response to my theory was "You've got to be kidding."

"I know it sounds crazy, but I've got to know; you've got to know. Call that sheriff up in Maine, find out if I'm right, then take me out to Westfleet. I need to go to Booker Farms." I referred to the photocopy in my hands. "Booker Farms By the Bay, that's where Natalie Booker was killed. I need to see if the ground was disturbed, because that's where the stuff grows—in sandy soil, or in newly turned-over turf, like in a ball field or a side yard."

"You think the killer placed each of the bodies in a damn—"

"I went online, and I talked to the owner of the Fantasy Shoppe last night, and I found out—"

"That you're nuts? This is most far-fetched thing I've ever heard!"

"It's right there," I insisted. I could feel my heart jumping around in my chest and yet all I could see was my mother's frozen face as she had sat at the kitchen table earlier today, the morning newspaper under her hands: "Sleeping Killer Still at Large." The reporters were desperately trying to put a tag on this guy, but they were so off the mark it was ridiculous. Still, that hadn't bothered me so much as my mother's dull eyes, the way her hair hung in her face, and the fact that when I offered to freshen up her coffee, I realized it was filled to the top and ice cold. She hadn't even touched it.

"What's right there?" Jake demanded, pushing back from his desk.

"The reason she was left in that yard. Look, Mrs. Hardy lives on the Falmouth line. I rode my bike all the way out there, and all the way back. I'm beat, Jake. But I'm right, or close to being right. The killer has a fixation with fairy rings, or with the fantasy world. The shop owner said there were websites on this stuff all over the net, and some people really believe in it, but most don't. It's just a hobby, okay? But I think this guy—"

"I think you have a fantasy fixation." He got up, thoroughly dis-

gruntled. "You can find those damned rings all over the place. Heck, everybody's got one on their lawn some time or other."

"But not everyone has a dead body in the middle of it. Jake, would you listen to me?"

He was already half out the door.

"Jake, the owner of the Fantasy Shoppe told me some people believe a fairy ring is the door to another world, a better world."

He paused then, turned to look at me.

"A place where you might want someone you loved to go. Jake, I might be wrong. I've been wrong before. But if this guy killed these girls, then later felt bad about it . . . Come on, they were laid down like they were being put to bed, to sleep. They weren't molested or bruised or anything."

"Just strangled, Herbie." He stepped back into the room. "You have set me in a different direction, I grant you that. I just had a man over at the Holcomber's asking more questions about their daughter's habits. Mr. Holcomber denied it all right, but the mother did say she had caught Donna coming in very late one morning, around three A.M. They didn't tell the father."

"He kept a tight rein on her, didn't he?"

"Mrs. Holcomber didn't think it very important, seeing as how it happened weeks before the murder." He sighed and I understood; what people don't tell the police can often be as important as what they do tell them. "Now we're

checking every shop that sells those figurines. He had to buy them somewhere; maybe someone has better records and can tell us who he is. We're also working overtime trying to identify this other girl, but . . ."

"You're feeling the pressure."

He grunted, nodded. "Chief is flying back today. He's getting a lot of flak for being out of town 'at a time like this.'"

"Those mushrooms pop up in sandy, undisturbed soils, Jake, and they spread out in rings that come and go for five or six years sometimes. I read about those mushrooms online and in an old *National Geographic* magazine. The groundskeeper at the park was having a heck of a time getting rid of them. The park is new, but the topsoil is sandy and it got infected somehow. Donna Holcomber was found beside the pitcher's mound, right where Mr. Hardy had been trying for weeks to kill a ring of mushrooms. I talked to his wife this morning. She said the stupid things were driving him nuts. Each time he thought he had them licked, they sprung right back up after a rain." I sank down onto the edge of Jake's desk. "So what I'm getting at is this . . ." I was tired, could feel my voice, my heart slow down, "Natalie Booker's body was found in the paddock. I don't think you'd have a fairy ring in a paddock. But outside of one, where the grass isn't all worn down by horse's hooves?" I looked at him in appeal. "Jake, you know the chief in Westfleet. Take me

out there. Ask him to open his old files. I want to see the farm. I want to see if—”

“I got things to do, Herbie.”

“Six hours on a bike, you think?” was my somewhat flip-pant response.

“You can’t be serious.” A pause, a couple of beats. “You’re that sure?”

“I’m never sure,” I admitted. “I just feel it.”

“A cop’s got to go on more than instinct, Herbie. That case is closed. We got Natalie Booker’s killer; he hanged himself”

“Is this instinct, Jake? Is it entirely?” I pleaded. “Come on, it started out there with Natalie Booker’s death. And I don’t think it ended with Tom Booker’s suicide. The killer is still around, Jake, popping up like those damned mushrooms! He might have killed in Maine a year ago, and now we both know he’s struck twice here in Manamesset. Come on, Jake, before he commits another murder.”

“It’s crazy.”

“Yeah, and so was the presidential election of 2000. Who would ever have thought that possible?”

“Are you doing this for your mother?”

“My mother is miserable and I don’t know why. I found some letters and . . .” I dropped it right there. The letters had nothing to do with Jake; they had nothing to do with anything. “Yeah, I think this one’s just too close to home, and she doesn’t know . . .” I couldn’t look at him. “She hasn’t even

asked if I’m . . .” Then back at him, firing off the words so hard, so swiftly, they stunned even me: “Okay, it’s got nothing to do with me. Absolutely nothing! But it might have everything to do with her. I want to ignore it, to walk away from it, to never help you again and if a guy falls over dead right in front of me, I want to step right over his damn body and ignore it! But she is scared. She’s terrified. And unhappy. I mean, most of the women in town must be terrified, right? Right?”

“Let’s take a little drive out to Westfleet.”

Where it started. Or so I thought. But no one could have been more disappointed than me, standing there on a bluff overlooking Westfleet Harbor, picture-perfect with sailboats still in the water and the distant roar of outboard motors. Below me, instead of an equally picturesque scene of meadows, barns, fenced-in paddocks and pasture land, pine trees and oaks, and maybe a pair of graceful horses peacefully grazing, was a huge, ugly scar. Pits and machines and road-building equipment and work crews on their coffee break. I looked around at Jake and his friend, Chief Ben Rose of the Westfleet Police Department.

“Now I could have told you fellows,” the chief went on amiably, as he had been doing the last half hour. He popped a few antacid tablets into his mouth; he’d been snacking on them like they were

candy. "Booker Farms is gone, sold off after dragging through the courts for six years." He turned to Jake. "Tom and Natalie were great people, despite everything that happened, but they never paid a cent of tax in their lives! Can you imagine the bill on a place like this?" Now to me. "They owed the town alone upwards of six figures in back taxes." Back to Jake, "And though it's a damn shame, at least the view will be pretty. Booker Farms Estates, housing for those with plenty of loose change."

So, what had I expected? That maybe outside the now nonexistent training paddock there'd be a field of green peppered with pretty white mushrooms growing in a ring.

Oh, Jake had asked about that, almost jokingly, and the chief had laughed back, saying, "Mushrooms? Well, no, I'd remember a detail like that. She was lying in the paddock with her stallion who was just walking around and around kind of nervously."

"No fairy ring," I murmured. Another long, lost trail. "And Booker Farms By the Bay is gone, replaced by a luxury housing development."

"Kind of sad, isn't it?" Chief Rose was at my side, offering me an antacid. I took one. "Nothing left now but the old barn—and oh, what a job that thing was to move." He belched and muttered an apology.

"The barn?" I asked.

"Historical society insisted on saving it. Barrel barn, built in

1884. They moved it over to their property on Sandwich Road. Had to do it in pieces. It was quite a thing to watch."

"Can I see it?"

And why did I ask that? What difference did it make? Did I expect to see mushrooms growing on the gray barnboards, for crying out loud? I'd taken a little idea from Mrs. Shore and Mrs. Angless and mushroomed it into this huge, impossible, incredible thing.

"Don't see why not," Chief Rose said in his usual jovial way. "Got nothing else to do today."

I know Jake thought it was all a dead end, my part of it, anyhow. The porcelain figures, well there might be some hope there, but there was also the possibility they could be neatly explained away, too. So, when I walked around to the back of the historical society's mansion on Sandwich Road, I kind of stopped short. It was an impressive structure, white-washed shingles, two stories with a cupola on top, but best of all, it was round.

Yeah, it was a round barn.

"It sure was something to see, them moving this thing," Chief Rose was saying behind me. "Worth saving, I suppose. Not too many of them left anymore. You know, they say they built them round for lots of reasons, one of them being to ward off evil spirits. There'd be no place to hide, or so it goes, in a round barn."

Hadn't I said you have to step back sometimes, view something

from a different angle in order to see it?

Not only had the historical society saved the entire structure of the barn—roof, walls, and doors—but most of the interior as well, including the wooden plaques Natalie Booker had placed above stalls of each of her thoroughbred Tennessee Walking horses: KING SPRITE, LITTLE BROWNIE, LUCKY L, ELVEN GLORY.

"Yes, but the society had to sell the horses, though," the chief continued. "They were gorgeous animals—champions, each and every one—and probably the reason Tom and her fought so much. Expensive brutes, even if they were beautiful."

"Lucky L," I said.

"Well, the Lucky Leprechaun," the chief said, leaning in the doorway. "Natalie had quite a thing about elves and leprechauns, and such." He looked at me, then at Jake. "Both she and Nellie did. Nellie, that's Nelson, Tom's brother, though I think Nellie might have taken it a step too far. I mean, fishermen are usually the most sane fellows on the planet—down-to-earth, practical—have to be, don't they?"

"Nelson Booker," Jake said to him, but he was looking at me. "Did he ever figure in your investigation?"

"Nellie?" The chief was picking his teeth now, considering this, then said, "Now, I just saw Nellie, oh, a week or so ago. Told me he had a new boat, not as big as the original *Alvin Grover*, but nearly as pretty. It's moored up your way,

matter of fact. Old Nellie is an odd duck, as we like to say. Had kind of a crush on Natalie and often, well, helped out when she and Tom were having problems." Now to me, "In fact, it was Nelson who found Natalie. Tore the poor guy apart."

"Nelson Booker found his dead sister-in-law?" Jake asked, or rather demanded.

The chief popped another antacid pill in his mouth. "Now don't you think we didn't check into it, because we did. Tom Booker was all over that woman—hairs, jacket fibers, the whole shebang. He'd threatened his wife more than once, and we had documented that. Nellie and I talked about it at the Checkerboards, that little diner down on the water. Oh, Nellie's had it hard since Natalie's murder and Tom's suicide. When Nellie lost his fishing boat, he lost part of himself. But he's getting back on his feet, worked on a boat out of Maine for a while, but he's returned to the Cape, taking day jobs here and there, roofing work, landscaping, that sort of thing."

"Mrs. Angless had her roof repaired just before . . ." I was cut off as Jake tore straight to the heart of things.

"Can you get me a recent photograph of Nelson Booker?" he demanded of Chief Rose.

I don't love him. I'm going to marry him, but I don't love him. Forgive me for saying this, but I now know it's the truth. Oh Jim, if I could just go back six

weeks, change my life, do things differently, and never have met you . . .

You can believe in fantasy. You can believe in it so well it becomes more real than any reality you've ever experienced. You can believe, too, that if a woman doesn't love you—as you love her—then she belongs in a part of your fantasy from which she can never escape. Keep her. Kill her. She's yours forever.

I would never tell my mother any of that. I would only tell her that a man had been picked up for questioning, that it was highly likely he was the guy who, while fishing off the coast of Maine a year ago, killed another girl, then placed her in a fairy ring to protect and keep her forever. There might even be more; this new database might open up a whole new world of connected crimes that seem—from our skewed little angle—totally dissimilar. So, though I'd no doubt Nelson Booker did love Natalie Booker (who ironically was the one who taught him about the fantasy world she enjoyed only as a diversion), and that girl in Maine, and Donna Holcomber, and lastly, the girl found in Alice Angless's yard, his love was . . .

Well, how can I define it? I was in the car when Jake went to pick him up. I was told to stay put, not to get out, to wait while the state troopers joined him and they walked out to the end of the

dock at Manamesset Pier. Nelson Booker's fishing boat was long gone, sold when fishing quotas became the norm and so many fishermen lost their livelihoods. But he had a new boat, a smaller one, the *Alvin Grover II*, which—as Chief Rose had informed Jake and me—had been named by Natalie Booker herself, being a cute corruption of "Elven Grove." How could we have known?

Or that in an elven grove, under the oak trees, is where the pixies and fairies, the fauns, and in Ireland, maybe the leprechauns played? And if you danced around the fairy rings nine times clockwise, you would open a door to a better, safer, more magical world?

So I was in the car, but I wanted to get out. I wanted to confront this guy, whom the girl at the Fantasy Shoppe had tentatively identified as the man who'd bought six figurines, six weeks in a row back in April and May. I wanted to get out and just for one minute confront him, ask him what right he had to do what he did, and more, ask him what right did he have to terrify my mother. I also wanted to tell him who had got him.

I wanted to tell him it was me. I wanted to tell him it was Death Kid.

"Where did you get these?" She had the three blue envelopes in hand. I had found the third one, or just a portion of it, in the last box I'd taken out, a box of *Popular*

Mechanics. "They were on your bed."

"In the junk you're throwing out," I said. Jake had just let me off. It was raining. My hair was wet and I was tired.

"I thought," she looked vaguely in the direction of her bedroom, "I put them all away."

"Hey, Mom, why didn't you . . ." Did I dare say it? And wasn't it possible that some of her unhappiness was coming from somewhere else, from a fantasy she had been carrying all these years, including the years she had been married to my father? "Hey, I know you've been kind of sad lately."

"Sad?" She sighed heavily and sank down on the edge of the coffee table in the living room.

"Is it me? Because I . . ." Did I lie? Tell her I hadn't helped Jake?

"Oh, no, no . . . in fact, what you did was a little noble, actually. You were fighting over a girl, weren't you?" There was a glimmer of light in her eyes, the first I'd seen in a long time.

"Mom . . ." I felt my whole body grow chilled as I sat down across from her. "You loved this guy in the letters; why didn't you marry him?"

"Herbie?" She looked down at the envelopes. "You read these?"

"I didn't know what they were, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have opened them. Look, I'm grateful you married Herbert Sawyer, Sr.,

or there'd have been no Herbert Sawyer, Jr., but . . ."

"But I did marry him." Suddenly her eyes were full of tears.

"No, Mom, hey, this guy . . ." I pointed to the envelopes. "His name was Jim. You married Herb Sawyer."

"And I still miss him every day," she said, not listening to me anymore. "And you're growing up, and you're dating, and in two years you'll be off to college. But as long as I have you, I still have part of him; I still have something of your father."

I reached out and touched her hands. "These letters here . . . they're written to a guy named *Jim*."

"But how would you know?" she asked, looking me directly in the eyes. "You were only three when he died."

"Come on, I know all about it. You met this guy Jim when you were engaged to my father," I insisted. "You were in love with *him*."

"Oh, Herbie! Your father was Herbert Senior, yes, but I never called him Herb or Herbert. And there *was* another man I was engaged to, and I *did* leave him at the altar, but these," she shook the envelopes in front of me, "were written to Herbert Jamison Sawyer. I called your father *Jim*."

"For crying out loud," I whispered.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archive

Sirens of the Tabloids. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

SWITCHBACK

Dick Stodghill



Illustration by Ron Chironna

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/02

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The man on the next stool in the seedy diner turned and said, "You a reporter from Wheeling in town about the murder?"

He was partially right. I was a reporter, but from Akron, not the nearby city in West Virginia, and I wasn't even aware of a murder. I pretended otherwise, nodded my head, and said, "What can you tell me about it?"

"Ben St. Clair knocked off Anse Rodin last night. Pumped two bullets in him whilst he was sleepin'. We all seen it comin' and figur' Ben oughta get a medal, not throw'd in a cell up in Cammackville."

"Sounds like this Rodin wasn't too popular around town."

A harsh laugh and then, "Rodin the rodent, that's what we called him. Mean as a timber rattler since he took to drink 'bout five years back."

My new acquaintance had muscular arms but the sallow complexion of a man who spent his days far from the sun. Among the hills and hollows of East Central Ohio that meant underground in a coal mine. He was one of the lucky ones who had a job, something most miners did not have in June of 1938. The Great Depression had put too many factories out of business, caused too many others to cut production, forced too many families to heat only one or two rooms of a house. The demand for coal was at low ebb.

"So why did St. Clair kill him?" I asked.

"Rodin was married to Ben's ex-wife."

"A love triangle?"

"Naw, nothin' like that. Ben had no use for her, never did, but they had a daughter, and not long ago Ben found out Rodin took a razor strop to her sometimes since he got to drinkin'. Just t'other day Ben whupped the daylights outta him on the street out front here. Said he'd chop him up and feed him to the hogs iffen he ever laid a hand on her again. A buncha people was watchin' and heard him say it."

"Is that all they have to go on? Doesn't sound like a very strong case."

"Naw, the county cops found his gun there. Had his initials stamped right on it. Anyway, he confessed."

"This St. Clair, does he live in a big house on Maple Street?"

"Yeah, it's his maw's place. How'd yuh know?"

So that was why I was in the miserable little town of Switchback. Before I could reply the man eased himself off his stool and said, "Gotta get to work. Name's Joe Blair."

"Bram Geary," I said as he extended his right hand. When I took it in mine it seemed like my bones were splintering. Along with the savage grip he gave me a wild-animal grin as he said, "Ifen yuh need to know more yuh can always find me here mornin's and suppertime."

With Blair's unwashed body no longer beside me I became aware

of the heady aroma of congealed grease and frying bacon that permeated the long and narrow room. A waitress who looked forty but might have been fifteen years younger poured more coffee into my cracked mug. "One refill," she snarled, "then it's another nickel." An elderly gentleman on the stool next to the one vacated by Blair hopefully pushed his mug forward. "No more for you, Pete," the waitress told him, then went on to pour refills for several other customers.

When her back was turned I slid my mug down to the old fellow and said, "Take mine, I've had enough." He gave me a suspicious look and said, "Didn't put nothin' in it, did yuh?" I shook my head, wondering when I'd wise up and stop playing Mr. Nice Guy. He pushed the mug back toward me, saying, "Wouldn't dare. Lucinda'd skin me alive."

Someone had put a nickel in the jukebox at the rear, and ironically, a female vocalist with the Russ Morgan band came on, singing "I Double Dare You." I glanced around the rest of the dingy establishment. A flyspecked portrait of President Franklin Roosevelt, the only artwork other than four girlie calendars, smiled cheerily down on the scene that offered little cause for cheer. Why wasn't I on the highway leading back to Akron instead of drinking rancid coffee in such a place? And because I wasn't, what was I going to do next?

It had begun four hours earlier

when Mrs. Bauer, my landlady at the boardinghouse on Dudley Street, had shaken me awake to say, "Tomorrow's your day off, isn't it, Bram?"

A reporter covering the police beat was accustomed to being routed from a warm bed in the hours before dawn because of a murder, a fatality on some lonely road, a house fire with people trapped inside, but not to be asked if his day off was coming up. Before my sleep-drugged mind could comprehend what was going on, Ivy Bauer said, "Mr. Reimer has to get to Switchback, and his car won't start."

"Switchback? That town somewhere west of Wheeling? Why?"

"He had a phone call from an old friend. It's an emergency."

I got dressed, tiptoed along the hallway to the bathroom, splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, and then went downstairs to where Mr. Reimer and Mrs. Bauer stood waiting. The elderly man, a retired drug-gist, was smiling apologetically, twisting the brim of his gray fedora nervously in his hands. As always, even at breakfast on a Sunday morning, he was wearing a suit and tie.

"I'm terribly sorry, Abraham. I didn't know what to do until Mrs. Bauer suggested asking you to drive me." He was the only person who called me by my proper name. Oddly enough, coming from him I rather liked it. Not from others, though. It was odd, too, that I had never heard Mr. Reimer's first name.

As we started for the front door, Mrs. Bauer handed me a brown paper sack. "I made some sandwiches in case you get hungry. Wait a minute, I've got a Thermos of coffee ready in the kitchen." Trust Mrs. Bauer not to let two of her "boys" set off into the night without something to see them through a hunger pang or a moment of thirst.

So we headed south past Soap Box Derby Downs and the ghostly outline of the Goodyear Zeppelin hanger where the giant dirigibles *Akron* and *Macon* had been built. I thought of the great silver airships, so stately and graceful, but now resting in watery Atlantic and Pacific graves.

We rode in silence, my 1934 Hupmobile cruising at a steady sixty-five along deserted highways, only occasionally passing an oncoming car. We were engulfed in an inky blackness broken only now and then by a lone light over the door of a barn, revealing the structure's outline and that of a dark and silent house close by. I slowed down on the empty streets of Massillon, Dover, and New Philadelphia, then speeded up again. Passing through Cadiz reminded me that despite being hit harder than most by the Depression, its residents were proud of the town's favorite son, actor Clark Gable.

Now we were on the final leg of the journey, so I glanced at Mr. Reimer and said, "This friend, is he in trouble?"

"It's a she. Her only son is the one in trouble."

"She was your girlfriend?"

"Oh, no. Just friends. We grew up together."

"In Switchback?"

"Until my junior year in high school, then my father's mine shut down and we moved to Benwood on the West Virginia side of the Ohio River."

I had known Mr. Reimer for five years, but realized that I knew almost nothing about him. I had just accepted his presence without thinking that he had a past. I knew he had owned a drugstore on Fourth Street in the suburb of Cuyahoga Falls and never missed a Cleveland Indians baseball game on the radio, that was all. He was so sedate, so dignified, that it was hard to visualize him as a youth in a rough and dreary coal mining town. "How long ago was that?" I asked.

"Since we left Switchback? It's been fifty-two years."

"But you've kept in touch?"

"Not until two years ago, when I heard her husband died and I sent my condolences."

I couldn't get a handle on the situation, but didn't want to ask more questions. Fifty-two years, that would have made it 1886—before automobiles, before airplanes, before radio, before just about everything we now took for granted. Who would have been president in 1886? I couldn't remember.

Mr. Reimer dozed off then, breathing heavily. I wondered if he felt old, or in his mind he was the same as he had been all those years ago? I remembered reading

somewhere that the biggest shock in a man's life came when he awoke one morning and found he was an old man. Had that day arrived for him?

Asleep, Mr. Reimer seemed even older than he had awake. Smaller, too. Old and small and alone, vulnerable in the dark of night in Appalachian hill country, unfriendly country.

The first light of dawn found few people up and about on the streets of Switchback. We entered town on a hairpin curve, a switchback. A steep hill rose just to the west and towered above the grassless yards and dilapidated houses we passed. Nodding toward the wooded hill, Mr. Reimer said, "Even in summer we didn't see the sun after three in the afternoon."

Following his directions, I drove south through the business district to Maple Street, then turned left. "Pull up here, Abraham," he said, so I drew to the curb in front of a large Victorian-era house set well back from the street. It had gables, a turret, heaps of gingerbread, and a massive front door with an oval, cut-glass window. The door opened, and a portly woman stepped onto the porch while Mr. Reimer was retrieving his small suitcase from the back seat. "I can never thank you enough, Abraham," he said. "Be careful on the way back, and don't forget Mrs. Bauer's sandwiches and coffee."

"Want me to stick around and make sure everything's okay?"

"Oh no, that won't be necessary. You should be home in time to enjoy most of your day off work."

I watched as he walked up the sidewalk and climbed the stairs, then turned and waved when he was beside the woman. A feeling of guilt came over me. It didn't seem right, leaving him alone without even knowing why he was there. I drove back to the center of town, uneasy of mind, uncertain of what I should do. I pulled to the curb when I saw an EATS sign and went inside the only place in town that seemed to be open, needing to collect my thoughts.

By the time I left the unsavory place my mind was made up; I was sticking around for a day or two. I walked to a phone booth on the corner, dialed the *Times-Press* number, and told city editor Ben Goldsmith where I was and that I might be onto a good story and needed a couple of days to check it out.

"Nobody in Akron gives a damn about a murder in Switchback," he barked at me. "Half the population never heard of the place and the rest aren't interested."

"There may be an Akron connection, Ben. Along with that I figure on doing a story on the effect of the Depression in coal mining country. There are people in Akron who came up there from around here and from across the river in West Virginia."

He laughed skeptically. "You do a think piece? I can just see it happening. But okay, Geary, I'll trust you on this. Three days, that's it. Anything more and

you'll be using vacation time."

A vacation in Switchback? A lovely thought, but three days was more than I had expected even though one of them was my day off.

I drove around a little, waiting for the town to come fully awake, if such a thing ever happened. I had seen the effect of the Depression on Akron and other cities of the Industrial Valley, but none of it had prepared me for Switchback. The business district was a shambles of vacant storefronts, some with boarded-up windows, some with shattered plate glass. The stores that remained open carried the bare necessities of life, which was why they had survived while those around them closed their doors forever.

It was the men, though, that opened a new door in my mind and left me shaken as few things ever had. Even at that early hour they were on the street. Small groups stood aimlessly on corners, others leaned against the fronts of buildings, the most downtrodden of all sat alone on curbs studying the pavement or looking straight ahead from glazed, unseeing eyes. They had lost their jobs, then their hope, then their pride. The mines had shut down through no fault of their own, but that didn't prevent guilt from creeping into their thoughts until in time it overwhelmed all else. They left home early and stayed away all day in a vain attempt to distance themselves from reality, from the awareness of wives lacking the resources to provide their

families with even the basic necessities and of children who were ill clothed and ill fed and sometimes went to bed hungry.

If they could somehow manage to come up with even a quarter it would be enough to buy a pound of hamburger and a quart of milk, but where were they to find that quarter when so many others were looking for one? Had it been weeks or even months of such an existence they would not have hit rock bottom, but it had been years. Now only ashes remained of the hopes and dreams that had once inspired them.

I don't believe I had ever felt quite so depressed. It was contagious, this all-consuming despair that engulfed Switchback. In the best of times a coal mining town was a dreary place, yet an energetic community where men worked at dirty, dangerous jobs and felt a certain pride in being strong enough of mind and body to do so. Such towns were not for the weak of heart, but now nearly everyone had become just that. Yes, it was infectious, this malaise, even to an outsider.

Shortly after eight o'clock I did what most newspapermen do when in need of information in a strange town: I went to the newspaper office. While driving around I had seen a faded *Exponent* sign above a doorway in a ramshackle brick building just off Switchback's main street. The windows were boarded up so I wondered if it was still publishing, but when

I tried the door it opened and I was greeted by the familiar smell of ink, newsprint, and dust.

I introduced myself to the lone occupant and explained why I was in town, or because I wasn't certain myself, did the best job possible under the circumstances. The *Exponent*, a weekly paper, proved to be a one-man operation with the editor, Stan Mendelbaum, also serving as reporter, makeup man, printer, pressman, advertising salesman, and circulation manager. Mendelbaum, lean and sparse of hair, was pushing sixty, so the ninety-hour workweek would have been a challenge for him.

"Ben St. Clair," he said, leaning back in a wooden swivel chair beside a cluttered roll-top desk. "Not a man who'd shoot another in the back, you can be sure of that. If Ben were of a mind to shoot someone, it would be face to face. Know anything about him?"

"Nothing."

Mendelbaum wiped his glasses with a handkerchief, squinting at me as he began, "Back in 1920 or thereabouts he was the star athlete at Switchback High. Did it all, but football was his best sport. Ran like a deer and hit like a battering ram. They called him The Blaster, and that's how the school's teams got their nickname, the Switchback Blasters. Some people think it was because of blasting in the mines, but Ben was responsible. Had a scholarship to play football at Ohio State, but a week after high school graduation he got married and went

to work out at the Little Sally. Ever heard of it?"

I shook my head. "It's a mine?"

"Used to be the biggest in these parts. Then in 1928 the methane gas let go. The men had been saying they could smell it, but an inspector the state sent down from Columbus said there was nothing to worry about. It was a rainy October morning when it went up. Forty-seven men died and more were left crippled. Ben was a hero again that day. The Little Sally had a circular metal staircase near one portal. They rode an elevator or followed sloping tunnels to get in and out, so I'm not sure what that staircase was for. Anyway, a miner named Rostoff, Ivan Rostoff, was badly injured. Ben picked him up and carried him to the surface on those slippery metal stairs. No one could understand how he managed to do it."

I was beginning to agree that St. Clair didn't sound like a backshooter. I said, "Why would he turn down a chance to play at Ohio State to get married?"

"Had to. Or he thought he did because it was the honorable thing to do." Mendelbaum filled and lit an old pipe, then through a cloud of white smoke said, "You see, he and a girl named Nancy Holliday were sweethearts all through school and were planning to get married after Ben graduated from college. But there was another girl named Margo Rexstead, an easy mark for any young fellow in town. Ben was no different than the . . . ely no

smarter, so one night after he'd had a few beers with the boys he ended up in the back seat of a Buick with Margo. Next thing she claimed she was pregnant and Ben was the father. Could have been any one of a dozen or more men, but Ben accepted what she said and married her."

"Was she pregnant?"

"Oh, yes. The one good thing to come out of the shabby business was their daughter, Brenda."

"Then she's the one this Rodin was supposed to have slapped around?"

"Right. Ben and Margo were divorced when Brenda was about ten, then a few months later Margo married Anse Rodin and she and the girl went to live at his place about three miles east of town. It seemed all right, I guess, until Rodin turned into a mean drunk. A few weeks back Margo left him for another man, another lowdown bum in my opinion, and Brenda, who had just turned eighteen, moved in with her grandmother. Ben lived there, too."

"Whatever happened to the other girl?"

"Go up to the library and you'll find her. Nancy Holliday's the librarian."

"I've been wondering about your windows being boarded up."

"Couldn't afford to replace the glass after the Nazi thugs broke them out. They'd have just done it again, anyway."

"Nazis? Here in Switchback?"

"You'd better believe it. Nazis, Communists, Socialists, Mussolini-

style Fascists, we've got 'em all. When men sink down far enough, when their bellies are empty, they're easy marks for any fanatic with a good line of bull."

"Why'd they pick on you?"

"With a name like Mendelbaum, you have to ask?"

The police station, my next stop, was in the rear of Switchback's City Hall, a forbidding structure of dark red brick with soot-blackened stone trim and battlements that would have been more at home on a fortress. The cop at the desk was overweight and unshaven, but my initial impression of having encountered an incompetent slob was wrong. After I told him who I was and why I was there, he proved to be well informed and cooperative. Cap Warner was his name, but the Cap had nothing to do with rank.

He had been on duty all night. The murder had been out in the county in the jurisdiction of the sheriff's department, so what he knew of the case came from monitoring the radio. He said, "It was comical, listening to them, then it got irritating. The only way any of those deputies got badges was by being one of the sheriff's cronies, either old friends or members of that scumbag Nazi bunch that parade around in their fancy outfits looking for trouble. Not one of them could find a snake in a woodpile unless it bit him, so that's why they took the easy route and picked up Ben St. Clair."

"I heard he beat up Rodin and threatened to do worse. And that his gun was used and he's confessed."

"That's the puzzling part of it. I played ball with Ben in high school and we ran around together. He's the last man on earth who'd shoot a sleeping man in the back, so why in hell did he say he's guilty?"

"Don't ask me, I don't know the man."

"And there's one more thing. Ben's gun has his initials engraved on it. Would a man with iron nerves get panicky and drop it there and run? Not a chance."

We talked a little more, then I asked if there was a good hotel in town.

"The Belmont. A block west of Main Street across from the railroad depot." When I got to the door he chuckled and said, "It's the *only* hotel in town."

The Belmont was like most hotels in a small town, four-story red brick with a large sign on the roof. To my surprise it was clean, had a nice lobby, a bar, a restaurant, and even a coffee shop that was open from five in the morning until midnight. I chose a two-dollar room with a bath rather than the one-dollar variety with communal facilities at the end of the hall. The *Times-Press* would pay my expenses, or so I hoped.

A row of phone booths lined one wall of a hallway connecting the lobby with a drugstore and newsstand. The first in line was out of order, so I used the next to call

Mrs. Bauer and say I was staying in Switchback for a few days. She had a dozen questions regarding Mr. Reimer's well-being. Without really knowing, I assured her that everything was okay. In the end, though, I was forced to tell her the reason he was in Switchback was because of the murder. That was enough to make her extract a promise from me to call her every day.

I bought toilet articles at the drugstore and two shirts, socks, and a few boxer shorts at a haberdashery on Main Street, all of which set me back nearly five dollars. I needed them anyway, but was glad I had twenty dollars in my wallet when I had started out. There were times when I had nothing but change in my pocket until payday.

After gathering my necessities and getting settled in my room, I drove out to Maple Street. Mrs. St. Clair answered my knocking at the door, but when I began explaining who I was, Mr. Reimer called out, "Abraham, is that you? Is something wrong? You didn't have an accident, did you?"

As he hurried to join Mrs. St. Clair in the doorway, I assured him that everything was fine and that I had decided to stick around a few days to do a little research for a story on coal mining. I followed them to a spacious living room furnished with overstuffed chairs, a matching davenport, ornate tables, and lamps with stained-glass shades that fit the Victorian exterior. There I was introduced to a young man of about

eighteen, a shy and introverted friend of Brenda's named Clarence Kohl. Brenda was expected soon, so he was waiting for her. He retreated to a chair in a dark corner to do so.

Mr. Reimer was too wise to fall for the tale I had told him, of course. "You've heard about what happened, haven't you?" he said.

When I admitted that I had, Mr. Reimer said he appreciated it but didn't believe there was anything I could do to help. I agreed but didn't tell him so. Instead I said, "Maybe I've heard things that you haven't, Mr. Reimer. No one who knew him believes Ben St. Clair is guilty. What I can't figure out is why he confessed."

Before he could reply, Mary St. Clair came in from the kitchen carrying a tray with coffee and oatmeal cookies. Once we were settled with our cups she looked at me and said, "I can't begin to tell you how much it means to have Wolf here for moral support."

I looked around expecting to see a large dog, but found only the three of us plus the young man who seemed to have been swallowed up by the massive chair in which he was seated. Puzzled, I said, "Wolf?"

Mr. Reimer smiled sheepishly. "I'm Wolf," he said. "My first name is Wolfgang, so when we were kids everyone called me Wolf."

Hoping to hide my laughter, I pretended to choke on my last bite of cookie, an act that fooled no one. I wasn't alone; from his dark corner Clarence giggled a little. Now I understood why Mr.

Reimer's first name had remained a dark secret. As for Wolf, if there ever was anyone ill fitted for the name, he was it.

Brenda arrived just in time to keep me from making some inane remark to cover my embarrassment. Unlike her friend Clarence, whom she proceeded to ignore, Brenda was self-assured to the point of being brash. She was a petite young woman, and pretty, but she needed to tone down her voice a few notches and, I came to learn, treat her elders with a bit more respect. At twenty-four, I seemed to be one of those elders in her eyes.

After the introductions, she turned to her grandmother and asked, "Any word about Dad?" When told that there was nothing new she said, "Those cops are so stupid. I can't believe they really arrested him."

It wasn't my place to do so, but I couldn't help saying, "He did confess, you know."

She gave me a what-rock-did-you-crawl-out-from-under look. "You know why, don't you, mister? Because he's lonely and unhappy and doesn't care what happens to him."

Put in my place, I swallowed the rest of my coffee and told them I had to go.

"If you're going to be staying awhile," said Mrs. St. Clair, "we have plenty of room so bring in your things."

"Uh, thanks, but I took a room at the Belmont. I come and go at odd hours and wouldn't want to put you out."

"I'd give you a key so you wouldn't bother anyone."

Mr. Reimer sensed my discomfort. "I think he'd be happier on his own, Mary. He's accustomed to living that way."

"Well, all right," she said, "but at least take your meals here. We eat at noon and six."

I told her I'd let her know in advance anytime that was possible, then made my escape. They were nice people, but the atmosphere was so tense and constrained I inhaled a deep and appreciative breath of warm June air when I was outside again.

After a hot dog and a glass of milk at the hotel's coffee shop, I drove around in search of the library. It proved to be a handsome stone structure with a red tile roof and CARNEGIE LIBRARY carved over the front door. The librarian, an attractive woman somewhere shy of forty, was helping an elderly lady pick out a book from a shelf labeled "Mysteries." The brown-haired younger woman was recommending Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key*. After picking up the cane she had let fall, the other began shaking her head. I was close enough by then to say, "It's very good. I'm sure you'd like it."

The old woman, eighty if she was a day, turned to glare at me, but then said, "Well, if you say so, all right."

After the librarian, who I felt certain was Nancy Holliday, had used the little rubber stamp on the end of her pencil to complete

the check-out process, the octogenarian hobbled off muttering, "It had better be good." When she was out of hearing range, I was given a wry smile and a "Thank you."

"We had been at it for fifteen minutes before you came in, but it's always that way with Mrs. Mikterian. Now, can I help you?"

I hesitated, wanting to ask if she indeed was Nancy Holliday, then losing my nerve and saying, "Do you have clipping files on local history? Something on the coal mine disaster?"

"Which one?"

"There's been more than one? I was thinking of the Little . . ."

"Sally. The Little Sally. That was ten years ago this fall, and yes, I have a folder with clips from the *Exponent* and the Wheeling and Martins Ferry papers."

"You seem to remember it well."

"It was a terrible thing, a horrible tragedy. Worse even than the one a few years earlier at Dawson Number One or those back before the war."

"I can't understand how men go on working in those places. The conditions are so miserable even without the danger."

"It's their job. It's what they do. Without the mines there isn't much work to be had around here. That's why things are so bad today."

"I've heard that the man they arrested for murder was a hero at the Little Sally explosion."

An expression I interpreted as wistful came over her face. "Ben was never short of courage. Ben

St. Clair, that's the man you're talking about. Courage and a sense of honor, those have always been his strong points. Sometimes, though, they've been his downfall."

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course not."

"He's confessed, you know."

"As I said before, that misplaced sense of honor can be his downfall."

She went to get the folder then, and as she walked away I had to admire the fit of her tight brown skirt, the slight sway of her hips, and the firm stride of her shapely legs. Ben St. Clair was a loser in more ways than one.

I spent an hour poring over the clippings, reliving that terrible day in the history of the depressing little town. I finished reading the last one with the feeling that I had a better understanding of Switchback and the grim fascination that such places have for a certain breed of hardy men.

When I returned the folder to the desk I worked up the courage to say, "You're Nancy Holliday, aren't you?"

"How do you know?" she asked suspiciously.

"Stan Mendelbaum told me about you and Ben."

Her face reddened as she said, "Did he also tell you about the only cowardly thing Ben St. Clair ever did? When he broke our engagement by marrying another woman he didn't have the nerve to tell me himself. I heard it from

some catty girls who thought the whole thing was hilarious."

I left feeling abashed, wishing I had kept my mouth shut.

I was at a loss for anything more to do. After walking aimlessly for a while, I returned to the miserable lunchroom where I'd had breakfast. The same waitress was on duty and the passing of time had done nothing to improve her disposition. After slapping a mug down in front of me so that the coffee splashed over the sides and puddled on the counter, she reminded me, "One refill and that's it."

It was swill, barely fit for human consumption, but thoughts of the men on the streets outside who would have eagerly gulped it down led me to fill my pipe with pungent Bond Street tobacco so that the smoke would dilute the taste as I sipped away until it was gone. Then with my foolish sense of guilt over having a little money in my pocket assuaged, I went back to the hotel. It had been a tiring day so I stretched out on the bed, knowing I needed to rest but believing I wouldn't be able to sleep.

The whistle of a train lumbering its way through town with a load of coal from some mine that was still working jarred me awake. I looked at my watch and was amazed to see that I had slept for more than two hours. After freshening up a little I went down to the lobby and again used the phone in the second booth to call the St. Clair house.

When he came on the line, Mr. Reimer sounded dispirited. "Abraham, they won't allow his mother or anyone else to visit Ben. Isn't that unusual?"

"It depends on a number of things, Mr. Reimer. Sometimes in a murder case they do it that way."

"They told her Ben doesn't want to see anyone or even talk to anyone on the phone. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"I can't recall, but it may happen without me knowing about it. I just don't know, Mr. Reimer."

"The oddest thing of all, Abraham, is he refuses to see a lawyer. He says he's guilty and doesn't need one. That's what they told Mary, but it's hard to believe it's true."

"It could be. From the things people have said about him he's strong willed, the sort of man who makes up his own mind and doesn't want anyone telling him what to do."

Poor Mr. Reimer was caught up in events completely unfamiliar to him. The same was true of Ben St. Clair's mother. They were bewildered by it all, unsure of what they should do and frightened by the thought of doing the wrong thing, or doing nothing at all. I wanted to help some way, but like them I was uncertain of how to proceed. If we were in Akron I might have been of some use, but here among strangers I was lost.

Of one thing I was certain, I needed to hear a cheerful voice. After getting change from the desk clerk, I used more of my

dwindling funds on another long-distance call, this one to Sue Baney. Our once-great relationship had been a little strained of late, but talking to her usually was good for my morale. She answered on the second ring and her first words came as a shock: "Is that you, Bram? Whatever are you doing in a place like Switchback?"

"You know where it is?"

"Of course. Have you forgotten that I'm from not far away in West Virginia?"

I hadn't forgotten, it just hadn't come to mind. I explained the situation, although doing so wasn't easy, then said, "How did you know I was here?"

"Jack Eddy called me a little while ago. He said about the same thing you just did, and he doesn't understand what you're doing any more than I do."

"I'm surprised he called you." And with good reason; my across-the-hall neighbor at the boarding-house on Akron's industrial east side rarely went out of his way to be considerate of anyone other than himself. When he did, I always suspected an ulterior motive.

"He felt I should know where you are," Sue replied. Then without realizing it she seconded my opinion by adding, "It was thoughtful of him and to me that's what's surprising."

"He's not a bad guy, Sue. Not as bad as you think, anyway."

"That's true. He couldn't be."

"Come on, Sue, give the guy a break. I wish you'd get to like him better."

"Better? I don't like him at all, so let's change the subject. When will you be home?"

"A couple of days, I think. Maybe we can have dinner and go to a show."

"You know my number. Now get off the line and quit wasting your money."

It had been good to hear her voice, but I wasn't too sure she had been glad to hear mine. I decided she was, though, so I went into the dining room and splurged on the fifty-cent dinner: swiss steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, a salad, cherry pie, and my choice of wine or beer. I chose the beer. I had a couple more in the bar, nickel mugs of Iron City on tap, but only after I had gone out and wandered around for a while.

The streets of Switchback were even drearier as the approaching night hid what little color there had been in the light of day. My opinion of the town didn't improve when I passed half a dozen Nazis fitted out in all their finery and regalia. One of them was Joe Blair, my acquaintance from breakfast. He let out a whoop when he saw me and stopped long enough to say they were going to a meeting with a guest speaker from the German American Bund in New York. He invited me to come along, but I escaped by saying I had an appointment.

Learning that Blair was a Nazi seemed to explain why he had a job in a mine when so very few men did. But being confronted by

storm troopers on the street of a town in the United States was an unsettling experience. Was the whole world going mad? Sometimes it seemed that way. Communist Party headquarters at the main intersection in Akron, Nazis marching down the streets of Switchback, what would be next?

After returning to the hotel and going into the bar I added a few more items to my list of depressing facts. Like most bartenders, the one at the Belmont was the garrulous type and knew everything that was going on around town. When I mentioned my encounter with the Nazis he told me what he knew about them, including the fact that they'd had a run-in with Anse Rodin, the murder victim. They had wanted to use part of his land and that of a neighbor's for training purposes. The neighbor, a man named Jed Claiborne, had agreed, but Rodin had refused. That squelched the deal and left both the Nazis and Claiborne furious, the latter because the Nazis were going to pay a large sum of money for use of the land.

"But the one who was really het-up," said the bartender named Tony, "was Margo Rodin, Anse's wife. She wanted that money in the worst way because the old boy sure wasn't bringing in much of it the past few years. When she left Anse a while back she moved in next door with Claiborne."

"Didn't anybody like the man? I haven't heard a good word for him since I hit town."

"Not much good to say about the old devil. He even had enemies in Bellaire and Bridgeport and Martins Ferry and a few other towns close by. Back during Prohibition Anse brewed the best beer and moonshine around. Even after it ended and the speakeasies went back to being regular bars again he kept at it for a few years. What some bar-keeps down along the river would do was serve a bottle of Corby's or some other cheap whiskey, then fill the empty with Anse's hooch, which set them back a lot less. The guys who'd drink that kind of rotgut never knew the difference. Some of the boys cleaned up pretty good that way, so Anse made some enemies when he got to liking his own product too much and quit selling it to them."

I finished off my second beer and went up to my room, worn out more by the things I had heard than any work I had done. What a sad thing it was, a man could spend a lifetime of forty-five years in the same little Appalachian hill town and then die without having a single friend to say a good word for him.

When I looked out the window in the morning, dark clouds scudded low over the ramshackle buildings of downtown Switchback. A drenching rain, that's just what I needed to make my day, but it never arrived. By the time I had shaved and showered the sun was managing to make a few brief appearances through the overcast.

I was still in the spending mood so I ordered the twenty-five cent breakfast in the hotel coffee shop: scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast, orange juice, and coffee. A cute waitress about my age even smiled, and when she poured more coffee into my cup, she didn't caution me that one refill was the limit without plunking down more cash. Strange, though, that the only other customer was a traveling salesman mapping out his day's itinerary. Apparently the locals preferred the greasy food and snarling waitress at the place that as far as I could tell went by the name of the sign over the door, Eats.

Unlike the salesman a few stools down the counter, I had no itinerary to map out. I sat with my third cup of coffee, enjoying a pipeful of tobacco, wondering what I was going to do and why I was hanging around town. When the salesman left to start out on his rounds, the pert little waitress with a turned-up nose and a twinkle in her brown eyes leaned on the counter across from me and we chatted about nothing in particular for a few minutes. Her name was Sally, so I asked if she was named after the mine and she laughed and said no.

We were exchanging meaningless banter like that when I felt a firm grip on my shoulder and heard, "Figured I'd find you cosy-ing up to a pretty girl, buddy."

I spun around on my stool and found Jack Eddy standing there. "What..." I said, then stammered a few seconds and started over:

"Jack, what are you doing here?"

"Hoping to get a little chow." He winked at the waitress, who now had eyes only for him, and said, "How about it, kiddo, think you can scrape up a little grub for me?" After she took his order and went back to the kitchen, he turned to me again. "You know how to pick the cuties, friend. What do they call her?"

"Sally, but you haven't answered my question. What are you doing in Switchback?"

"Never been here before, buddy, and figured a place with a name like Switchback was worth seeing."

"Get serious, will you?"

"Well, truth is, there's nothing at all going on back home, nothing coming in but boring insurance jobs, stuff like that. I had some time off coming to me, so I took a few days of it to drive down and check up on you, keep you out of mischief."

I wasn't going to admit it, but I was glad to see him. Jack Eddy was a first-rate private eye, an assistant manager at the Akron branch of Wellington's National Detective Agency. He had a way of cutting through things that to me were a bewildering mishmash and going right to the heart of the matter. He was arrogant, overly ambitious, and at times downright annoying, but he knew how to get things done. One thing was certain, Switchback had not seen the likes of Jack Eddy, so before he left there would be people who'd be pleased he had come and others who would wish they had never heard his name. It was

that way wherever he went.

As for me, along with being pleased to see him, I was flattered that he had sought out my company. Jack was a loner who kept people at a distance, but a real friend to those he liked. Showing up in Switchback made it seem that I was one of the few he cared about.

One of those annoying things, however, was that whenever Jack Eddy was around I could just as well have been part of the wallpaper for all the attention paid me by the girls. It didn't matter that Jack was hard of eye and thin of lip or that at twenty-six his sandy hair was growing sparse. At five-eleven he stood four inches shorter than me, and that should have counted for something, but it didn't.

Sally was like all the rest. As she placed his food on the counter, she giggled and blushed when he said, "That looks great, sweetheart, almost as good as you. I knew you'd come across."

I could never have used a double entendre like that, or if I had it would have resulted in a slap on the face. Jack Eddy got away with it all the time. I turned aside in disgust.

While he ate breakfast I filled him in on the happenings in Switchback. When his plate was empty he leaned back with his second cup of coffee, bummed a cigarette off me even though I could see a pack of Camels in his shirt pocket, and then satisfied, said, "So what's on your agenda for today?"

"Nothing. There's not a thing to do that I can see."

He emitted a scornful "Humph!" and sat shaking his head. "No imagination, that's your trouble, friend. Everything neatly laid out in front of you and you couldn't see it even if it jumped up and hit you in the kisser. First of all, who had access to St. Clair's gun? Aside from himself, of course, and from what you say he didn't do it. Next question, why did the guy confess?"

After taking a sip of coffee and blowing a smoke ring in my direction he said, "It floors me that you haven't been out to the scene of the crime, buddy. That's our first move, then we'll pay a visit to the St. Clair house, and after that we should have a good idea of what our next step will be."

I might not have been out to Anse Rodin's place, but at least I knew where it was, and that was more than could be said for Jack Eddy. I was a little steamed by what he had said—maybe more than a little. We were going out the revolving door to the street when something occurred to me. "If you're going to spend the night here, Jack, you'd better check in."

"I'm way ahead of you, buddy. I took care of that as soon as I got here."

Of course he had. Anyone that perfect would have already done so, and that steamed me up even more.

"We'll take my car," I said.

"No we won't, mine's more comfortable. Anyway, I like to have my hands on the wheel." Control,

he always had to be in control. Fine, I'd save on gas.

The road was winding and narrow, and Jack drove too fast until I cried, "Stop!" He slammed on the brakes and pulled over in front of a sign that arched above the entrance to a side road. The faded lettering read "Little Sally Mine." I said, "There it is, the Little Sally."

"I can see that for myself, sport. So what?"

"There was an explosion there ten years ago. Forty-seven men were killed and it's been closed ever since. Ben St. Clair was one of the heroes that day."

Jack gave a low whistle. "Forty-seven. Wow. A man has to be nuts to work down in one of those places. So how did St. Clair come out a hero?"

I filled him in as we drove on. We didn't go far before seeing a mailbox with "Rodin" painted on its side in crude black letters. Some prankster had added a T after the name. Jack turned in and followed a rutted driveway to a dilapidated house set well back from the road. Never having been painted, its clapboard siding was a dirty gray. The chimney leaned at a precarious angle and the porch steps sagged in the middle. Untended bushes and a bumper crop of weeds gave it the look of a shack somewhere in a Congo jungle. "Great place," said Jack. As he opened his door he added, "Watch out for snakes."

With that cheery thought in mind I followed along behind him. Before we reached the steps

a woman walked out on the porch, a cigarette drooping from a corner of her mouth, a shotgun cradled in her arms. "Hold it right there, boys," she said in a voice with the texture of sandpaper. "Who are you and wha'da you want here?"

She was about forty, maybe a little younger, and she could have stepped right out of a scene from the Hatfields and the McCoys. Her slitted eyes and set jaw stopped me in my tracks, but Jack ventured a little closer, removing his gray fedora and saying, "Good morning, my dear. We're with the Norka Insurance Company and need to see the crime scene before authorizing payment on the policy. Just routine, you know."

"Anse had a policy? It's news to me. Who gets the money?"

"Why you do, assuming you're Mrs. Rodin."

"That's me. How much?"

"I left the papers at the hotel." He turned and said, "I believe it's three thousand, isn't that right, Mr. Ellsworth?"

When it dawned on me that I was Mr. Ellsworth I mumbled, "Uh . . . yes, that's right."

"So may we come in and look around for a minute or two?"

"You sure can, boys, be my guest. Come right ahead. When'll I get my money?"

"Shouldn't take too long for the home office to finish up the paperwork."

The house was filthy and smelled like a sewer. The bloody sheets were still on the bed where Rodin had died. I couldn't wait to

get back outside and inhale some clean country air. When we were in the car again I asked, "The Norka Insurance Company? Akron spelled backward, but where did you dream that one up?"

"Out of the blue, buddy, out of the blue. Dangle the possibility of money in front of somebody like that and they'll melt like butter every time. A real doll, wasn't she?"

"I just hope I never see her again, especially if she's toting that shotgun."

"She won't remember you, just me, so quit worrying."

Knowing he was right was just one more irritation to add to the others of the day. It was late morning when we pulled to the curb in front of the St. Clair house. Mr. Reimer was taken aback at seeing Jack Eddy, but he was aware of Jack's talents so his surprise quickly turned to elation. Like a man who suddenly found hope in what had been a hopeless situation, he told Mrs. St. Clair of Jack's background and capabilities. She, too, became excited.

Jack wasted no time in starting to ask questions. Where had Ben kept his gun? Who knew about it and had access to it? The answers didn't clarify the situation, at least in my mind. Ben had been awarded the gun as first prize in some amateur athletic event in Zanesville a month before he graduated from high school. It bore his initials and came in a presentation case that was kept on the fireplace mantel in the

room in which we sat, although Mrs. St. Clair couldn't explain why. She was a clubby woman—garden, bridge, and even bowling—and was active in a variety of civic affairs, so it seemed that half the people in town had been in the house during the past week or so.

"How about Ben's ex-wife, the charming Mrs. Rodin?" asked Jack.

Mrs. St. Clair smiled at Jack's choice of words. "Yes, Margo came by to visit Brenda a few times, but not while Ben was here. They didn't get along too well, you know."

Jack turned to me and said, "That librarian you told me about, what's her name?"

Before I could reply, Mrs. St. Clair said, "Nancy Holliday, a lovely young woman. We talk about books and authors, and when I can't get to the library—I don't drive, you know—she drops them off for me. I mean books, of course." Everyone smiled at that and she blushed a little before going on, "Nancy also comes when Ben isn't here. They were engaged, you see, but haven't even spoken since Ben's unfortunate marriage."

"Everybody says Ben is a swell guy, but it sounds like a lot of people make a point of avoiding him. Has a temper, does he? Argumentative?"

"Oh no. On the contrary, he's withdrawn, pays very little attention to anyone, and doesn't seem to care about much of anything. It breaks my heart because he was so energetic as a boy, so

enthused about everything, and so interested in everything. Now he just sits alone staring off into space most of the time, seldom has two words to say."

"This big change, it dates back to his marriage?"

The talk was depressing to Mrs. St. Clair. She nodded and said, "Yes, that just seemed to take all the starch out of him. Brenda was the only good thing to come from it. He loves her dearly, but never has been able to really get close to her." She gave a despairing sigh and shake of her head. "I don't know if you understand what I mean. I can't seem to put their relationship into words."

As if on cue, Brenda walked in the front door. With her was a brassy, cocky youth her age who did his best to project himself as a tough, worldly-wise guy. It was laughable, the act put on by the fellow we were told was Bob Thornton. Obviously he would have much preferred being introduced as Humphrey Bogart.

Almost as an afterthought, Clarence Kohl followed them into the room. He got as much attention from Brenda as I did from the girls when Jack Eddy was around.

There was no way to escape having lunch at an oversized table in the dining room. An elderly woman served us a salad of dandelion greens and a heaping portion of spaghetti, which wasn't bad, but not as good as could be had at a dozen Akron restaurants. When Jack Eddy asked, Mrs. St. Clair said the woman

came in six days a week to help with the cleaning and cooking. She lived in a poorer section of town—they all were, in my opinion—and needed the money because her husband had been crippled in a mine accident years earlier. Jack didn't appear satisfied until told that the man, whose name was Ivan Rostoff, had been bedridden for ten years.

Mealtime at the St. Clair home was somewhat of a social occasion, with anyone who happened to be around at the time just casually taking a seat at the table. It looked to me like Mrs. St. Clair held perpetual open house. Strange, in view of Ben's taciturn nature. Then again, he may not have cared one way or the other. Jack Eddy asked a few questions while we ate, none of which were probing or upsetting to anyone, and aside from that the conversation was desultory at best. After having chocolate pudding for dessert, we took Mr. Reimer aside and talked a few minutes, then made our excuses and left.

"What a weird setup," I said when we were back in Jack's car. "People coming and going, that Kohl kid practically living there, and that Thornton trying to act like the heavy in a second-rate movie. Do you think he might be the killer?"

"Him?" Jack's laugh was curt and scornful. "That guy never did a thing in his life for anyone else, or anything that might make him live up to his phony image. He's just a meatless bone."

"Maybe, maybe not. So now what do we do? We've run up against a brick wall, Jack."

"You think so? We'll see." He took a battered Hi-Speed Gasoline map of Ohio from the glove compartment. "How do we get to Cammackville? We're going to pay a visit to Ben St. Clair."

"No visitors allowed yet."

"We'll see about that, too."

We stopped at the hotel and Jack went up to his room while I sat in the lobby watching the comings and goings. A Rotary meeting had just ended in a room opening off the restaurant, so some of Switchback's self-styled leading citizens were milling around before going back to wherever they spent their working hours. Observing people like that interested me. They were always the same wherever you went.

I had picked up a Wheeling paper at the newsstand and skimmed over it when the crowd thinned out. The usual stories, something else that was always the same wherever you went: armed robbery, a house fire, the Japanese capturing another previously unheard of city in their invasion of China, Hitler mouthing off about having no further territorial demands in Europe if only a large portion of Czechoslovakia was handed over to him. Poland and Russia wanted a bit of it, too. Good stuff like that, so I tossed the paper aside after checking to make sure that Little Orphan Annie, Dick Tracy, and Tailspin Tommy were getting along okay.

When Jack Eddy stepped out of the elevator, I did a double take before I knew it was him. He had changed into an expensive blue serge suit I hadn't known he possessed, was wearing wire-rimmed spectacles, and carrying a leather briefcase. What really shocked me, though, was that the hair visible below an expensive homburg hat was gray and he had grown a salt-and-pepper mustache during the half hour he had been gone. He had aged twenty years, and I was speechless.

"Let's get moving, buddy," he said, so I followed out to his car.

When the shock had worn off I said, "What in hell is going on? That fake mustache, those glasses, I thought guys like you only wore disguises in the movies."

"I'm a lawyer from Pittsburgh, if anyone asks. You're my law clerk."

"I don't like the sound of this. You're going to do something illegal, aren't you? If I'm with you, I will be too, so where's my disguise?"

"You don't need one. Nobody pays attention to a law clerk. You'll be forgotten before we're out the door."

"Now look, Jack, I don't even want to go in that door."

"Then you can sit out in the car and miss the fun."

We made most of the ten-mile trip to Cammackville in silence, aside from the times I pleaded with him to slow down. It was a harrowing ride, up and down hills, through wooded hollows, around one hairpin curve after another,

past crudely lettered signs on rocks high above the road, signs with encouraging messages like PREPARE TO MEET THY MAKER. I wasn't prepared, but it seemed as though I should have been whenever we met an oncoming car or speeding truck and when Jack ignored signs warning of dangerous curves ahead.

Cammackville proved to be more prosperous than Switchback, thanks to the elaborate stone courthouse and the people it drew to town. At one side of the courthouse square was a red brick house, the sheriff's living quarters, and attached to it at the rear a rectangular structure with barred windows and a forbidding air about it.

I followed Jack Eddy inside, of course, and watched in admiration as he played his role to the hilt, the dignified and expensive big-city lawyer who didn't have time to waste on hick-town jailers and cops. It worked, and in no time we were seated in a small room waiting for Ben St. Clair to be escorted to us. Jack winked at me when we were alone. I stared at him, shaking my head.

Every bone in Ben St. Clair's body was resentful, and every movement he made expressed that fact when he was ushered inside and found two strangers waiting. "Who the hell are you guys?" he said. "I made it clear I don't want a lawyer. I don't need one because I'm pleading guilty at the arraignment tomorrow."

Jack bristled at the arrogant attitude of the man. "Look, smart

guy, we're here because of a friend and because of your mother, not because of you. As far as I'm concerned, they can fry you tomorrow, but that would make some good people unhappy."

On that cordial note we got down to business. Jack discarded his pretext, told Ben who we really were and why we were there. "Maybe you don't give a hoot about your own skin," he said, "but how about showing a little consideration for your mother and daughter. Think Brenda would be proud the day they strapped her old man in the chair?"

Ben's face flushed in anger. "You leave Brenda out of this, mister. She's got nothing to do with it."

The truth suddenly hit me, although it should have much sooner. Ben St. Clair was all too willing to take the fall because he believed his daughter was the murderer. Why had it taken me so long to see the light when it was so obvious?

I listened as the two of them exchanged barbed remarks the way men who take an instant dislike to each other are prone to do. It was accomplishing nothing that I could see, not that it mattered now that the truth had dawned, but to ease the charged atmosphere I said, "I talked to Nancy Holliday yesterday."

He whirled on me like a bull that had just been hit on the snout. "Leave her out of this too, fella! Who the hell do you think you are butting into my business?"

That made my blood pressure shoot up as only a few things ever had. "Your business? Why you self-centered, egotistical, self-righteous bastard! She ceased to be your business the day you decided to marry someone who had slept with half the men in town and you didn't even have the guts to tell Nancy to her face, just let her hear it from so-called friends who were laughing themselves silly behind her back. What really gets me is that she's still carrying a torch for you after all these years. You're not worth it. You don't even come close."

Rather than retaliating as he had with Jack Eddy, he stared at me in shocked silence for a moment. Then he shook his head and said, "She quit caring long ago."

"She should have, but she didn't. Too bad, she deserves more than she got out of life." I turned away, stood up and walked over to the window and looked at the world beyond the iron bars. What little passed between the two of them after that didn't make it past my ears.

A few minutes later we were back on the street. As soon as we were out of hearing range Jack Eddy started laughing. "Wow! I didn't know you had it in you, buddy. You really let him have it, and I loved every word of it."

"He got to me, Jack, he really did. I can't stand those self-righteous types."

"Well, friend, I don't think we saw him at his best. Under different circumstances we might

have thought he was a swell guy and had a couple of beers with him."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. Things don't usually rile me up that way. So what's next, now that we know Brenda's the one he's trying to protect?"

"We knew that from the start. At least I did and you should have. But just because he's willing to take the rap for her doesn't mean he's right and she's guilty."

It was the next morning before we were able to make contact with Brenda, who had gone to a dance in Wheeling with Bob Thornton. Apparently she wasn't so broken up over her father being in jail that she'd let it interfere with her social life. Jack and I had dinner in the restaurant at the Belmont. The food was excellent and I wouldn't have minded a second helping of pork chops. Even so, only half a dozen other tables were occupied. The Depression, its effect could be seen everywhere. After that we spent an hour in the bar listening to Tony's views on world affairs, then took a little walk to get some fresh air. We were in bed before ten o'clock, or at least I was.

Brenda, her grandmother, and Mr. Reimer were dawdling over their breakfast coffee when we arrived at the St. Clair house. I looked around and asked, "Where's Clarence?" Without him it seemed like a piece of furniture was missing.

In a bored tone Brenda said, "This is one of the days he works at Bonner's Grocery. He's a stock boy or something."

We talked a while and Jack told Brenda about our visit to see her dad, which she had already heard secondhand. He didn't mention how acrimonious the meeting had been, of course. When all the questions had been answered he posed two of his own: "Why were you out at Anse Rodin's place the day he gave you the latest beating, and how many people knew about it?"

"I still had things out there that I wanted to get. Some clothes and records and my little radio." She thought for a minute before answering the second half of the question. "I don't think anybody knew about it except the people who were here two days later when I forgot and came downstairs wearing a short-sleeved blouse and they could see the marks."

"And who would that be?"

"Let's see, there was Dad and Grandma. Oh, and Clarence and Bobby Thornton."

"Did your mother know?"

Brenda shook her head, but Mrs. St. Clair said, "Yes she did. I told her."

We left soon after that. This time we had taken my car, so when I was behind the wheel and ready to step on the starter I said, "Now what? You think you have it figured out, don't you? Are you ready to tell me what's going on in that mind of yours?"

He gave me one of his favorite

one-knuckle punches on the arm. It stung like fire and made tears well up in my eyes. "What," he said, "and spoil the surprise? You're not one of those people who tell the ending when a movie's only half over, are you?"

As I pulled away from the curb he said, "Let's find that grocery store."

"Bonner's? I've seen it. It's only a couple of blocks away."

When we pulled up in front of the small frame building on a corner just south of downtown, Jack said, "Wait here, friend," and got out and went inside. A few minutes later he returned with Clarence Kohl in tow and had him get in the back seat. Jack climbed in front again, then turned half-way and sat with one arm over the seat. I moved a little, too, so that I could see what was going on. As most introverted young fellows would be when confronted by a pair of older men under such circumstances, Clarence was pale and shaken.

"Let me tell you a story," said Jack. I couldn't see him playing the role of "The Singing Lady" on the network radio show for children, so I grinned until he cast an unfriendly glance in my direction. He went on, "There was this young fellow who was crazy about a girl, had been since they were kids in grade school. She didn't pay him much attention, but he never stopped hoping that she might start feeling differently about him. There was nothing in the world he wouldn't have done for her, so when he found out a

man had mistreated her he picked up a gun and killed him. Sound familiar, Clarence?"

Jack didn't get an answer; Clarence just stared at him from eyes wide and round.

"But this was a good kid," Jack continued, "so his mind was in turmoil when the girl's father was arrested for the deed. He didn't know how to handle it, but knew he would have to come forward before the father was put on trial and sent to prison."

There was an interlude of silence that dragged on for a minute or more, then Jack said, "How about it, Clarence? Isn't it time to come clean, get it over and done with?"

The youth suddenly found his voice, and it was surprisingly forceful. "What did you expect me to do, sit around and let that bastard go on beating her? I'm glad I did it and I'd do it again." His voice trailed off, though, as he added, "I never thought they'd arrest Mr. St. Clair."

The murder had been committed out in the county so it was the sheriff's case, but from what he had heard Jack felt it would be better to turn Clarence over to the police in Switchback. Cap Warner was pulling desk duty again and that was fortunate, far better than having it be some young hot shot.

I didn't feel like hanging around while the processing took place so I left and drove back to the St. Clair house. They were stunned by the news, could hard-

ly believe it was true. I heard "Not Clarence, surely not Clarence" a dozen times before heading back downtown again. Jack was ready to leave when I got to the jail. Clarence was back in a holding cell until the sheriff's men arrived to take him to Cammackville, so I didn't see him again and was glad of it. The poor, misguided kid faced a lifetime of misery because of a hopeless love for a girl who didn't care.

Jack and I had coffee in a booth at the greasy diner with the EATS sign and received the usual admonition about refills from the surly waitress. When she had returned to the counter I said, "How did you know, Jack?"

"One thing was obvious from the time I got here. There were only two reasons why the killer would have dropped the gun and left it for the cops to find, either it was someone trying to frame Ben or someone who panicked. There were several possibilities—the ex-wife, Brenda, the kid. The only one Ben St. Clair would have tried to protect was his daughter, but she didn't fit the picture. Clarence did."

"I guess you're right, but it still isn't clear in my mind."

Jack Eddy laughed, leaned across the booth and gave me another one-knuckle punch on the arm. "It doesn't have to be, buddy."

I made my final trip to the St. Clair house in early afternoon. The shock had worn off and preparations were underway for Ben's homecoming. Mr. Reimer

told me he was going to stick around a few days and not to worry about how he'd get home.

When I returned to the hotel, Jack Eddy had already checked out and was gone. I lingered in the lobby a little trying to gather my thoughts, then went upstairs and stuffed my things in a paper sack, went down again, and checked out myself.

The *Times-Press* was my first stop when I arrived in Akron at five o'clock, but before writing my story I called Mrs. Bauer to say I wouldn't be home for supper. She clucked her tongue when told that Mr. Reimer was staying on in Switchback for a while.

The phone rang just as I laid my story on Ben Goldsmith's desk. I barely had time to say hello before Goldsmith shouted, "Who's there with you?"

I glanced around the newsroom that had been bustling a few minutes earlier and found it deserted. "No one, but I'll look around and—"

"There's no time for that. Shirley Temple's having dinner at the Mayflower so get down there fast."

"What for?"

"For once just try using your head for something beside a place to hang your hat," he said, then hung up.

I ran the few blocks to the hotel, having no idea what I'd do when I got there. My press card got me past the brute guarding the door to the dining room, and from there I had only to hurry over to the crowd hovering near-

by as the young actress and her parents ate supper. Having her in Akron was a major event, and a surprising one, even though the Saalfeld Publishing Company on the south side had sold more than fifty million copies of various Shirley Temple books. She was America's darling, a little curly-top who had cast a bright light on a country mired in gloom and darkness, had made people smile and leave theaters feeling better than they had when they arrived.

That didn't help me know how a police reporter should cover the story of a ten-year-old girl eating pork chops and asparagus. Hope reared its head when I saw the *Beacon Journal's* leading writer of feature stories scribbling notes. With three Temple bodyguards giving me the fisheye, I elbowed my way over to where I was standing behind her. When she wrote something down, I wrote something down. It may have been cheating, but it saved my day, perhaps my job.

From a pay phone in the lobby I called Sue Baney and said, "It's me, I'm—"

"I knew you were back."

"How did you know?"

"Jack Eddy called and said you'd be coming."

"Seems like he's calling you a lot lately. Have you had supper?"

"Come over here, I'll fix something and we can listen to the fight."

Things had been happening too fast for me. The Joe Louis rematch with Hitler's pride and joy,

Max Schmeling, had been the major topic of conversation for weeks and I had forgotten about it.

We had hamburgers and home fries as we listened to the preliminaries. With the fight about to begin Sue said, "There's a couple of beers in the icebox, if you'll get them." I hurried to the kitchen, not wanting to miss a second of the bout I had been anticipating for so long. The bottles were behind everything else, I had to open three cupboard doors before finding glasses, and I had to hunt around for an opener.

"Has it started yet?" I called as I hustled along the hallway to the living room.

"It's over," Sue said, and it was hard for me to forgive the grin on her face. In ninety seconds of the first round, Joe Louis had knocked out the only man who had ever beaten him. I had missed it.

Switchback, Shirley Temple, the fight that began and ended without me. I would never look back on the week as a high point of my life.

Ben Goldsmith liked my Shirley Temple story, ran it on page one, but there was a sneer both on his face and in his voice as he said, "Damn similar to the one in the *Beacon Journal*. Guess a guy like you has to get his ideas wherever he can." He cut the Switchback story to the bone and ran it with the state news on page thirty-seven. He was right, though, nobody in Akron cared about the murder of a shiftless man a hundred miles away. As

for the story on the effect of the Great Depression on a coal mining town in Appalachia, it never got written. Goldsmith was right about that too.

Mr. Reimer returned home by bus a few days later. He didn't have much to say and I didn't want to pry. I had the feeling that any idea he had about starting a new life in Switchback with his old flame was dampened by the hectic comings and goings at the St. Clair house. After seventy years of bachelorhood it would take some doing to adjust, to take the part of an old dog having to learn new tricks.

I often thought of driving down to Switchback for a day, nosing around a bit to see what had de-

veloped in the lives of the people I had met. Above all I wondered if Ben St. Clair had come to his senses and made up for all the lost years with Nancy Holliday. And Brenda, had she also wised up and dumped the phony Thornton kid? Did she and her father develop a closer relationship? What about Joe Blair and his wannabe Nazis? The *Exponent*, was Stan Mendelbaum still managing to keep it going? And Clarence Kohl, how was he making out in prison, assuming he went there?

I didn't learn the answers because the trip to Switchback turned out to be like so many things people intend to do, but always tomorrow or someday soon. It never happened.

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UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

No question but that it was murder. Both victims had been stabbed. Blood was spattered all over the hotel room. The man lay on the floor in his pajamas and robe; the woman sprawled grotesquely across the bed in her nightgown.

Detective Saul Solvitt surveyed the scene. There was no sign of forced entry; the victims had evidently admitted their killer or killers into the room. Solvitt turned to the hotel manager, who appeared pale and shaken. "Who discovered the bodies?" he asked.

"The m-maid, sir," the man replied. "S-she came to make up the beds. She knocked. No answer. She used her pass key to open the door, and when she saw, ah, she screamed. She's downstairs recovering. Do you wish to—"

Just then a short, rotund man came through the doorway. "Oh my God!" he gasped. "It's turned out worse than I imagined."

"And just who are you?" asked the detective sharply.

"I am—or was—this man's employer. My name is Anton Abernathy. I am the owner of a chain of eight antique stores throughout New York State. You've heard of Anton's Antiques, no? Anyhow, each of my stores is managed by a different husband and wife team. One is run by Mr. and Mrs. Kilmer, another by Edward and his wife."

"And you just happened to be staying at the same hotel as the victims?"

"Well, actually I reserved a room for each couple for two nights here at the hotel, with one couple on each floor—three through ten."

"Why?" Detective Solvitt pressed.

"To be honest, sir, certain, ah, irregularities have cropped up at my Saranac store. Customers have been complaining of fakes, cheap furniture disguised as eighteenth-century highboys and tilt-top tables, that sort of thing. So I called all my managers together to announce that I was immediately reassigning each couple to a different one of my stores. I had hoped to establish the guilt of the parties responsible if similar skulduggery occurred in their new store. But I never imagined it would lead to—to something like *this*."

"So you brought the eight couples together to drop this bombshell of shifting them to other stores," said Detective Solvitt. "Tell me more about the arrangement here in the hotel."

Mr Abernathy gulped, then related the following:

1. The manager of the Windham store has the room two floors below Helene's husband and two floors above Mr. Lawson. Their first names are Arthur, Bertrand, and Charles (in some order).

2. Neither the men now at Valhalla and Oxford nor the men to be transferred there include George.

3. The manager to be transferred to the Rochester store is on the floor just below Henry and just above Mr. Jones. Their wives are Agatha, Carmel, and Eileen (in some order), but not Mrs. Inch.

4. Gilda's husband (who is not from Oxford) is two floors above George but more than one floor below the manager at Utica (who is neither Henry nor Mr. Olson). Their last names are Lawson, Myles, and Norris (in some order).

5. Agatha's husband (who isn't George) is on the floor just below Mr. Inch (who is neither Daniel nor Delila's husband) and more than one floor above the man to be transferred to Oxford. They are now at the Queens, Rochester, and Saranac stores (in some order).

6. Mr. Palmer (who isn't Henry) is on the floor just above the manager at Troy (who is neither Mr. Jones nor Delila's husband) and more than one floor below Bertha's husband (who isn't Mr. Inch). They are being transferred to Saranac, Valhalla, and Windham (in some order).

7. The manager of the Queens store is on the floor just below Frank and just above the man being transferred to Utica.

8. The manager at Valhalla is on the floor just below Eileen's husband and just above Arthur.

9. Flora's husband is neither Mr. Norris nor the man to be transferred to Saranac.

10. The manager at Rochester is on the floor just above

Bertrand and more than one floor below the man to be transferred to Valhalla.

"Now that I know the victims are the man and wife about to be transferred to Saranac," Detective Solvitt declared, "the obvious suspects are the dishonest manager and his wife now at the Saranac store, who murdered the victims to keep the full extent of their crimes from being discovered. I'll question Mr. and Mrs. _____ at some length.

The guilty pair soon broke down and confessed.

Who killed whom?

.....

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"UNSOLVED"

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SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

Irene Moore stabbed Freda North that morning. She confessed she suspected the victim was having an affair with her husband.

FLOOR	HUSBAND	WIFE	STATE	PROFESSION
5	Chester Moore	Irene	Wisconsin	architect
4	Edward Kilmer	Grace	Utah	electrician
3	Andrew Olson	Janice	Tennessee	contractor
2	Bryan North	Freda	Texas	banker
1	Delbert Lange	Helga	Virginia	dentist

FICTION



Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/02

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When the twelfth century Anno Domini became the thirteenth, Ramón the fresco artist was alone on the road to Santa Susanna. The scream of a mountain lion in the nearby foothills pulled him up short.

I'd wager it's almost midnight, he thought, although the turning point meant little to him. He wouldn't even have given it a second thought if the priests of the church in Santa Susanna hadn't told him about the date and its significance.

As he walked on he put the wild animal's cry out of his mind. The mountain lion had already become Anger in his next commission's depiction of the Seven Deadly Sins.

There was neither wild beast nor man to be seen when he reached the rectory behind the church a little while later. He had to knock hard on the rectory door to rouse the servant boy, who showed him to a spartan room with a cot, where he hoped to sleep off the brothel's wine.

But that was not to be. Before dawn he found himself following the boy into the church and up the central aisle toward a cluster of clergymen craning their necks to peer into the transept arch.

Claws clicked on stone, and he recognized the Bishop of Barcelona's huge wolfhound sniffing at the foot of a pillar.

"The Lion of Judah crawled off your fresco last night, Senyor Ramón. Escaped from the ceiling." Father Pau was the only one who bothered to look at Ramón. "You must paint it back. Quick as you can." His voice echoed off the plastered walls.

What time is it? wondered the master artist. *Time yet for prayers at prime?* The church's thin alabaster windows were just beginning to acquire a milky glow. The vault still smelled of his new frescoes' damp plaster and of tallow candles from the early prayers.

"I suppose this means that today—New Year's Day—is the end of time." From inside the knot of clergymen came an Aragonese-accented voice. Ramón had guessed right, the bishop was there, too. Father Pau spoke Catalan, like his parishioners, but the bishop was too good for that. "The heretic Joachim is right after all," the bishop said in Spanish, but with less authority than usual.

Ramón covered his mouth. Not to hide a yawn. The learned Bishop of Barcelona might believe a painted Lion of Judah could come to life and then run out into the Pyrenean foothills, marking the end of all time, but not Ramón. Ramón wasn't burdened by too much learning. He relied on what his senses told him, not upon some scholar's opinions. He had no choice. Ramón could not read—not the latest heretical discourses inked on parchment scrolls—not even the most ornately illuminated Gospels.

Ramón looked up at the murals. Where there ought to have been a standard depiction of the Lion of Judah leaping out from behind the

folds of King David's robes, there was nothing but an outline of white plaster, like a piece of marzipan cut from a sheet of sweet almond paste.

The clergymen's bewilderment was yet another proof to him that reading dulled the senses, blunted the memory, and befuddled common sense. Was this really what had wrenched him from bed before prayers at prime?

To Ramón it appeared that his young apprentice, Guillem, had simply failed to fill in the space as he'd been told to do. Nothing so ominous as a sign of the Apocalypse. The young man must have been a little too eager for the holiday he had declared to celebrate the frescoes' completion—and to celebrate the new century.

"Beg pardon, Your Excellency," Ramón said. "My apprentice seems not to have finished his work yesterday as he promised. I'll see to it immediately. He shall be severely punished." He wondered, though, whether that would be possible, given the lad's wealthy, influential father.

The short, plump bishop, dressed as usual in aristocratic satin robes, peeled his eyes away from the ceiling. "No," he said. "You misunderstand. The man painted it. I saw it myself at vespers, just before sunset. Inspected the whole ceiling." He looked up again at the gap in the painting. "The Lion of Judah was there on New Year's Eve. A great black beast with razor-sharp teeth, a curling scarlet tongue, and seven eyes—just as I commissioned it."

"In that case," said Ramón, resigning himself to the situation's gravity, "this must be vandalism."

He looked around for an assistant. That morning only Ermessenda, the tiny spinster who mixed the painters' plaster and pigments, was still there, hovering near the portal. He turned to her, conscious he was wearing what she called his "Ego Sum Lux" expression. (It was the sole Latin phrase he knew—he often painted it under Christ's feet.) He was beginning to rue the day when he'd consented to take on apprentices like her and Guillem simply for the fees they could pay.

"Yes, Senyor Ramón," she said. "Guillem finished the lion just after the hour of none. I saw him. I helped him put away his paints. Then we took down the scaffolding so the bishop could examine the frescoes when he arrived at vespers." She indicated some planks and ladders stacked by the wall.

Only Ermessenda of Ramón's four apprentices had spent the night in the small town. Only Ermessenda had no home to visit on holidays in the Pyrenean foothills. She slept somewhere in the church, he thought. Surely she must have heard or seen something.

One-footed Father Pau confirmed her claims. "Guillem was the last of your apprentices to leave—all but Ermessenda, that is. I re-

member Ponç finished the border by the portal several hours before Guillem."

That means my other apprentice, golden-haired Miquel, was gone long before midday, Ramón thought.

Ramón knew Father Pau a little better than he did the other clerics. Years ago, his first artistic commission had been to carve him a wooden foot. That was before he fell in love with paint. Ramón did not know how the priest had lost the foot, but it was gone at the ankle, as if it had been chewed off. He glanced down to find one wooden toe peeking out from under the priest's humble tunic.

"It means the Seventh Seal has been broken. And now the Third Age has begun. What the heretic Joachim de Fiores predicted has indeed come to pass." The bishop gestured to the clergymen around him. His heavy gold rings glistened in the growing daylight. "I must send word to the Holy See, and I beg you to hide this spectacle from the eyes of the parish until we know better what to do. We mustn't let them panic. Do what's necessary—paint another Lion of Judah if it's possible. Or hang another canvas curtain, one that won't fall down this time." The bishop snapped his fingers, and the wolfhound stopped sniffing around the altar to cower at his heel.

Ramón turned to Ermessenda with that *Ego Sum Lux* gaze again, a look she once said resembled his portraits of Christ. ("No blasphemy's intended," he had assured her then. "But all painters put something of themselves into their work.")

"After prayers at vespers, Guillem hung a wet canvas over that piece of plaster so it wouldn't dry too quickly. Didn't want it to crack," Ermessenda confirmed.

"And the parishioners will be here for services at sext. There's not much time to hide it," said Father Pau. "I pray none of them saw anything last night. Some were here for confession until vespers."

"Was the lion still there at complin?" Ramón asked. He had seen no one last night when he returned to town, no one but the servant boy. That was after complin, possibly even after midnight.

He noted how they all marked the time of day by the canonical hours. Even he—matins before dawn, prime at dawn, terce at mid-morning, sext at noon, nones in midafternoon, vespers at evening, and complin at bedtime. The church had that effect on laymen.

"Yes," said Father Pau.

"You saw it?" asked Ramón. "I mean, you particularly noticed the Lion of Judah?"

"Well, I saw the canvas," he said. "The canvas was undisturbed. And I remember that Arnau, one of my parishioners, asked me why it was covered. He'd seen your lad painting it earlier in the day."

"Ah, since the spot was hidden by the canvas, the lion could have been destroyed at any time last night?" Ramón asked Father Pau.

"Yes, if truth be told."

"And was the canvas still there at matins early this morning?" he asked.

"Senyor Ramón," said the bishop, steeping his hands before his chin as if in prayer, "you seem not to understand. But perhaps I overestimated your intelligence. There's no mystery about the time when this event occurred. I have no doubt it happened just after midnight—at the start of the new century. The Lion of Judah broke free then. Who saw it last is of no significance. It's gone, that's all."

Later that morning Ramón accepted a small coin purse from the bishop with a deep bow. Nonetheless, he could not imagine why the bishop was so insistent that the vandalism was something more—an omen.

Then—with brass equipage jingling and wolfhound trotting behind—His Excellency and his mounted entourage left town to send word of the prodigy to Rome.

While Ramón could be amused by the bishop's phantasms, he certainly would never underestimate the man's power—or the cruelty of his band of retainers.

As soon as they were left to themselves in the church, Ramón instructed Ermessenda to repaint the Lion of Judah. Who else was there to do it? He thought that under the circumstances the churchmen couldn't object to a female having a hand in the frescoes. Besides, for the little chapel at Tuixén she had painted the best Lion of Judah he'd ever seen—a big black animal with a head like a panther's, not like some great dog, the way his other apprentices always painted the beast.

He recalled returning her ironic compliment that day, saying she had put something of herself into the panther's depiction. Now he wished he'd kept his distance. But she was the favorite aunt of a dozen wealthy, powerful Barcelona tradesmen; close to his own age, not green like the boys; and besides, there was no denying she was one of his most talented apprentices.

When together they reassembled the scaffolding, he asked her, "What did you think of Guillem's lion?"

She just shrugged. He knew that gesture meant she disapproved. When he gave the lion to Guillem, she'd said, "Why don't you give it to someone who really wants to paint it?"—referring to Guillem's notable lack of ambition. Of all the apprentices, only he never complained about the assignments.

Ramón's school observed a proper hierarchy in all things. Apprentices began by learning to mix plaster and pigments. After a year or two they graduated to painting—first, borders and clothing; then

the Lion of Judah or sometimes the Lion of Sant Marco (which, though the Catalan peasants' favorite images, were easy to paint—not like human faces and hands); then the more difficult images, fire and instruments of torture, and—for some, their favorite—demons. Accomplished artists were given the angels, then the martyrs, and finally the apostles. Ramón, of course, reserved for himself the best, most difficult, parts. He sketched the designs for the frescoes and painted Christ Pantocrator, seated with graceful drapes across knees that seemed to poke right out at the worshiper. That's why his patrons hired his school—Ramón's Christ was renowned throughout Catalunya.

Ermessenda was the only apprentice whom he hadn't promoted beyond plaster and pigment. *It's a shame*, he thought. She was a skillful copyist of nature. A *pubilla* who hadn't spent her dowry as most did on a husband when she inherited her father's estate, she had paid it all to Ramón to take her on as an apprentice. Of course, money alone wouldn't have been sufficient to persuade him to accept a female pupil: she'd also shown him a beautifully painted scroll and other work samples. And she made no pretense of humility—she was ambitious; she intended to complete a masterpiece, she said, and set up her own shop one day, no matter what he thought about it.

Still, he pitied her at first. She seemed to know her body held no special attractions for men. Even in those days, a decade ago, her thin body had reminded him of a raisin, possibly sweet but undoubtedly dry. Although she was an adept apprentice, it would never do to let her paint too often. The churchmen wouldn't like it. One day, he thought, she would have to join a nunnery. Perhaps nuns would let her paint their walls.

Apprentices! More trouble than they're worth. And now he had to find out which one of them vandalized Guillem's first painting.

Before she started work, Ramón climbed up to get a better look at the spot where the Lion of Judah should have been. The vernal equinox was just past. The light was dim. But he was used to working in shadows. He touched the plaster. Winters in Catalunya as a rule were dry, so the plaster tended to dry out in about a day. This plaster was still quite damp.

"Hand me a knife," he said to Ermessenda. Holding the blade, she laid the handle in his extended palm. He wrapped his long fingers around the familiar wooden tool without looking at it and began scrapping away the plaster. A skillful fresco painter seldom needed to remove his mistakes, but even the Master of Solsona had not always been so skillful. He had learned early in his career how to remove a poorly painted ear or hand with just such a knife.

The plaster came off easily. Underneath was a second layer of plaster—still slightly damp. And that underlayer had pigment in it,

black pigment, the color of the Lion of Judah, just as Guillem had said he planned to paint it. The light-colored top layer of plaster felt more gritty than usual, and it had several short, dark fibers embedded in it. "How did you mix the plaster yesterday?" he asked his apprentice.

"The same as always," she said. "With lime and sand. The lime's a little dark around here, but the esparto grass is good fiber to bind it."

"Esparto grass? This looks like hair."

"The Lion of Judah," she said.

He looked down at the crown of her head and her sky-blue kerchief, out of which protruded a single, wiry strand of dark hair. She looked up at him, but at that angle he couldn't see the expression on her wimpled face. Was she serious? Or was she being facetious, as she so often was.

"Look at this." He handed her the knife with a dab of plaster on the blade.

She examined it in silence, then gave it back to him. "Not my hair, if that's what you think. Looks like dog hair to me." He'd found strands of her hair in the plaster before.

Around terce that morning—just when another of his assistants, Ponç de Comalda, returned, looking for his canvas roll of tools—Ermessenda finished the Lion of Judah's body. Ponç was young, in his second year of apprenticeship, like Guillem. Like Guillem, too, this was the first church in which he'd been permitted to paint anything—in Ponç's case the geometric borders and martyrs' clothing. He reminded Ramón of a fast-growing puppy—his hands and feet were too big for his body, even though his face was framed by a line of brown Catalan beard.

The rectory servant told Ponç, "The Beast with Seven Eyes ran away last night."

He looked puzzled but watched Ermessenda work for awhile without comment.

Ramón had recognized Ponç's envy of the woman's skill from the first time she'd shown the young man her sketches of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Ponç showed promise, too—but unfortunately for him he lacked a father with a fat purse. So he was doomed to a slow rise through the apprentice ranks. Besides, Ramón had chosen his successor: Miquel was already painting flames and haloes after only four years' training. No need for anyone else to handle more responsibility.

"If I'd known you'd be back today, I would have let you paint the lion," Ramón said.

"See you in Solsona," Ponç said as he finally left, slinging the canvas roll over his shoulder.

She completed the third eye just before sext, when most of the townsfolk were expected to arrive for services. Ramón commended the white orbs she'd painted, which seemed to pop right out of the snarling skull. She stopped work and hung a drape over the scaffold before anyone else could see the fresco.

Despite the bishop's warning, word of the mysterious event had leaked out. As the villagers shuffled up the aisle toward the altar, they all stared up at the spot where the Lion of Judah had been. From the transept Ramón listened to them whisper.

"Merciful God."

"The Beast with Seven Eyes is loose."

"It was bound to happen one of these days."

"Maybe they shouldn't paint any devils on the church's walls."

The bishop and priests might interpret the missing lion to be the fruition of a prophesy, but not the townsfolk. They knew nothing of calendars or dates, only that, of course, these frescoes—at night—could breathe and run away.

After the services, Ermessenda went back to work. She said she wanted to finish the image before dark. "You don't need to supervise me. I may not have had much experience painting on ceilings, but I know what has to be done." She'd often practiced painting Lions of Judah using boards or tablet-like trays of plaster and canvas scraps. All his apprentices practiced Ramón's techniques this way.

Ramón wandered outside with the departing worshipers, considering what he should do about his apprentice's misbehavior, and found the town square had transformed itself into a market. A stocky farmer had tied four mastiffs to a post near the church and was shouting, "Fine dogs! Two years old! Who has coins to buy a guard dog for your goat herd?"

"Arnau," shouted one man. "I may have something worth trading those beasts for." He walked over and slapped the farmer on the back as if they were old friends. The fearful mood was broken by good fellowship and wagging dog tails. Then one after another most of the crowd joined the bidding contest.

But Ramón's attention was drawn to a figure on the distant horizon. He often found himself focused on distant objects like that—he liked to think about how to depict them in his paintings. He found it intriguing that distant objects gave the illusion of being small, even when you knew they were large.

A man was approaching, tugging a cart behind him. He looked like any other farmer with something to sell, hurrying to reach the market before his customers had spent all their money on Arnau's hounds.

Through the wall of leather-covered backs around them, Ramón couldn't see what was being done to Arnau's yelping dogs. *Thank the*

Lord for those dogs. They were distracting the townsfolk from the missing Lion of Judah.

Their gloss, black coats brought to mind the short black hairs he'd found in the damp plaster that morning. If he had told the priests about those hairs, no doubt they'd have agreed with Ermessenda that they came from the Lion of Judah. Common sense told him they were fragments of Ermessenda's brittle, wiry hair—she'd mixed that plaster covering Guillem's work, he'd wager half the bishop's gold purse on it.

The farmer with the cart seemed to be moving more and more slowly the closer he got to the church. *He must have been running for a long time with that cart*, thought Ramón. *Maybe he's giving up hope of a high price for his produce.* What was it? Cheeses? Root vegetables? The season was late for oranges or figs or even chestnuts—and early for anything else.

Ramón chuckled to himself, imagining the look on Guillem's face when he found out his Lion of Judah was gone. A simple boy, he'd probably believe his creation had come to life and leapt to the floor, but no doubt he'd also go on about his work. Guillem didn't seem particularly bright. Certainly not ambitious or greedy for fame. He hadn't even thanked Ramón for favoring him with the task of painting the Beast with Seven Eyes. Not like most of his apprentices, who were forever begging to be promoted to martyrs or angels or at least Lions of Judah.

The cart puller stopped about a hundred feet down the street, gasping for breath. The crowd around Arnau was still bidding on his dogs, and bidding high. The cart puller was going to be too late now.

Ramón had seen how excited Ermessenda was to have another chance to paint the Lion with Seven Eyes. For a few apprentices, he supposed, a chance to paint the beast was almost as good as a chance to paint an angel.

Poor Ermessenda, he thought, she didn't often have a chance to paint, not even borders or clothing. Not like the male apprentices. The most senior were already admired—his patrons even asked for them by name. Soon they'd complete their personal masterpieces and set up workshops on their own. (Not that Ramón was worried about rivals—his reputation was too well established.)

Perhaps he should have let Ermessenda paint something—some folds of drapery or gold flames enveloping one of the burning martyrs—he would have if he'd known to what lengths she was willing to go. *Who else could have done it?* he wondered. *She slept in the church. She would have seen anyone who entered it and heard them dragging the ladder across the stone floor. And she isn't one to keep secrets like that for the other apprentices. But could she have raised the ladder alone?*

He supposed it would have been a fairly harmless prank if the bishop weren't racing to Rome to spread false rumors about the Apocalypse. Or if the villagers of Santa Susanna and the surrounding countryside didn't fear the Lion of Judah was loose somewhere in the foothills.

The farmer pulled his cart right up in front of Ramón and let go of the handles. It rocked backward on its two rough-hewn wheels, dumping its load at Ramón's feet with a thump. The wizened old man leaned over, put his hands on his knees, and tried to catch his breath.

He looked up at Ramón.

A woman looked down at the farmer's cargo and screamed.

It was the body of Guillem of Gerona, Ramón's apprentice. The painter of the missing Lion of Judah.

"Throat," the farmer said. "Chewed clean through."

"The Lion of Judah," said Father Pau, suddenly appearing at Ramón's side. He leaned forward heavily on his thick cane.

"The Beast with Seven Eyes?" the farmer asked.

Father Pau nodded. "Yes, my son. That must be it. This is the boy who painted that beast yesterday. And look now. It has jumped down from the church ceiling and slain its creator."

The commotion that followed the priest's pronouncement alarmed Ramón. He knew there was no telling what a panic-stricken town of Catalonians would do. And if word of this reached Solsona or Barcelona, his school might be in jeopardy. It sounded too much like sorcery, and artists were suspect enough as it was.

Father Pau led the frightened farmer into the rectory, but he could barely answer the simplest questions about what had happened until he was handed a flagon of good red Pinedes. Then he said, "I was coming to town to buy a sack or two of flour. About a mile from town I found him. Lying in the path. His throat torn to pieces. You saw it. Torn to pieces."

"Where on the path?" asked Father Pau. "North of here or south?"

"North, not a stone's throw from Arnau de Manlleu's front gate," he said, looking at the man with the mastiffs, who stood among those crowded into the rectory to hear the farmer's story.

"But you didn't see the body when you left home today?" asked Ramón.

Arnau, the mastiff seller, shook his head and stared at his feet. Ramón thought he must be lying. *But why?*

"I heard a wild animal growling last night as I returned here from Solsona," said Ramón. "Is it dangerous to travel alone around here? Are there many rabid beasts in the foothills?"

Everyone just looked at Ramón as if they didn't understand his questions. The Lion of Judah haunted their imaginations.

The priest insisted that Ramón take charge of his apprentice's

body. So, after the rectory servants stretched the corpse out in the windowless cell where Ramón had slept, he turned once again to Ermessenda. "Find some rags and a basin of water to clean the blood away," he said, thinking the woman would take care of the mess, as she always did.

Left alone, he looked at the wound. Ramón was not one of those artists who studied corpses to learn the intricacies of the human form, but he was familiar enough with the sinews and muscles of the human neck. And he'd seen his share of corpses—a lifetime's worth of family laid out on their beds; mutilated battlefield dead; discarded carcasses of galley slaves, whipped and starved to death; and, of course, numberless executions. Prosperous Catalunya wasn't immune from death.

Maybe it was the effect of the flickering candlelight, but the blood at the young man's throat looked almost black. No, he thought, *the light makes a difference*. Red can look blue in shadows. Something to keep in mind when applying red paint to walls in dark corners.

To him Guillem's slender neck appeared to have been savagely torn by the wild beast's teeth. Torn and chewed, and just as the farmer had said, his head was nearly severed. He crossed himself and offered a silent prayer of thanks for his salvation from the rabid mountain lion.

There were scratches and bite marks on Guillem's hands, as if he'd tried to protect his face from the animal. A massive lump on the back of his skull told a tale of the young man falling backward onto a rock. The blow must have knocked him out or at least made him too groggy to save himself from the animal's bites.

Yet, when Ramón looked beneath Guillem's clothing something struck him as odd. If a wild animal had attacked and killed him, why did it not eat some other part of him? It seemed unlikely the farmer had scared the animal away before it could do that kind of damage. The man said he found Guillem not an hour ago, and yet the blood was dry and crusted, and his limbs slightly stiff, as if he had been dead for several hours.

It looked like Guillem had been mauled by a trained attack animal. His groin was bruised. *Attack dogs go first for the groin*, he thought, *to draw the victim's hands away from his face, then go for the jugular to kill*.

Then he found a single short black hair in the blood at Guillem's throat. Like the hairs in the plaster. Like the hairs on Arnau's dogs. An attack dog had been set upon Guillem and then pulled back by its master after killing the young man—Ramón could not escape the conclusion.

The lump on his skull must have come from a cudgel, not a rock.

"The rags," said Ermessenda, holding one out toward Ramón as if expecting him to clean the corpse. He looked up at her with his I Am Reason eyes.

"I can't possibly do it," she said. "It wouldn't be decent. Such a young man."

"No, I suppose not," he said. "Ask the servant."

He wiped his hands on a rag. "You know," he said, "I thought you were the one who plastered over Guillem's Lion of Judah."

Her little brown eyes grew round. "Do you really think me so foolish?"

"Who but you knows how to mix fresco plaster?"

"It wasn't of the best quality," she said. "Any farmer who ever plastered his own *masia's* walls could have done it. Mixing isn't difficult. My talents are wasted with the drudgery you give me."

"If you mention that one more time, I'll pack you off to a nunnery," he said, not for the first time. "So, who did it?"

"I don't know. I slept in the vestry. Quite soundly, thank you," she said like the proud Catalan *pubilla* that she was. "I heard nothing."

He apologized for accusing her, then went in search of Father Pau.

He found him unfolding linens, preparing for prayers at nones. His face was the color of plaster.

"Forgive this interruption, Father," he said, "but I must notify Guillem's family. Shipwrights from Barcelona. His father paid me well to take care of his *fadrister*, his youngest son. I owe him that much. And I think I owe him a better explanation of his death than that the Lion of Judah, which Guillem painted yesterday, mauled him after escaping from the fresco. He'll think I'm mad."

"But, my son, is that not exactly what has happened?" the priest asked, tears welling up in his eyes. "It may sound mad. But it appears that what the heretic Joachim preaches is true, and all that I believed in the depths of my soul must have been mad." He shook his head slowly.

"Father, I assure you there's a commonsense explanation for the lion's destruction," he said. "And if I didn't see the mastiff hairs in the new plaster, I would even have said there's no connection between the vandalism and Guillem's death."

"I don't understand," the priest said.

"Nor do I, yet. I'd like to visit the place where Guillem died. And I have questions for this fellow Arnau. What do you know of him?" Ramón inquired.

"He is a *rabassair*," said the priest. "A tenant farmer who holds his lease from the Bishop of Barcelona, but only so long as his grapevines live. *Rabassa mort*. He's subject to the law of *rabassa mort*." Father Pau meant that Arnau was a former serf of the bishop's—one who'd bought his freedom and his land lease with vine stock. "He's been

having problems with his vineyard of late, too. That is why he needed to sell his dogs today.”

“Does he attend prayers often?”

“Yes, usually at midday,” said the priest. “Did you not see him here today? He was here yesterday, too, but later. I remember because afterwards he watched the dead apprentice and his female helper working on the frescoes for awhile. He commented that the Lion of Judah looked like a mastiff to him.”

Later that day, Ramón helped the farmer pull his cart home, now bearing a heavy sack of flour. The path they took led north from Santa Susanna into the mountains, away from Barcelona where his dead apprentice lived. He wondered why Guillem had been walking in that direction.

The farmer pointed out the bloody spot in the path where Guillem had died and the gate to Arnau’s vineyard. They looked in vain for a bloody rock on which the lad might have hit his head. *As I expected*, thought Ramón.

When the farmer left, Ramón studied the deserted winter landscape around him. He often paused like that to find some detail that he could abstract from nature to use in his work. A leafless beech tree or a dried lily pod, he thought, could better illustrate how fleeting life is than could a stylized martyr stretched out on a rack. He looked down at the ground. Guillem’s blood had soaked into the earth there, leaving only a dark spot and clots on the dry grass.

Over the years the farmer’s cart had dug ruts in the path, but other than that Ramón could see no signs that he had passed that way today or any day recently. No footprints. No paw prints of the Lion of Judah anywhere to be seen or followed. Ramón half wished he believed as the priests did that the Lion of Judah was at fault and that he could track it into the mountains.

Ramón turned up the path into Arnau’s vineyard, and stepped over the stile. He wound his way through the leafless, gnarled winter vines. It always amazed him how thirst-quenching, intoxicating liquid could be produced by such withered grapevines. He paused before one trellis where the vines appeared in fact to be dead, *rabassa mort*.

Beyond the vineyard stood Arnau’s *masia*. It was a typical Catalan *casa pairal*—a spacious family home surrounded by flourishing green *horts i vinyets*.

If Arnau was a *rabassair*, as Father Pau had said, then he’d best do something to hide the dead vine from his landlord. His leasehold would die with the last of these vines, and without a leasehold he would revert to serfdom. Ramón was grateful once again for his own free artisan status.

He wondered if the bishop or one of his men coveted this property. It would hardly surprise him to learn Arnau's vines weren't dying of old age—*rabassa mort*—but rather the vines had been murdered.

He paused a moment before knocking. Arnau was a strong man, and Ramón was alone. And when he finally let the iron ring fall against the massive door, the echo off the flagstone floor inside sounded to him like the heavy hand of the Grim Reaper.

A woman who must have been Arnau's wife admitted Ramón into the *masia*. Arnau was seated in the *llar de foc* fireplace, beneath its vast hood, a roaring fire behind him. A huge mastiff lay curled at his feet. Its ears perked up at Ramón's approach and its nostrils twitched, but Arnau calmed it by scratching its huge head. It obeyed him instantly.

Arnau's wife offered Ramón a flagon of wine. He studied the family—three children playing on the hearth and another on the way. A man in need of money.

Ramón explained his mission and then asked, "How is it that you failed to find Guillem's body on your way to town today?"

Arnau said, "I did not pass by it."

"But the body was right at your gate."

"Sí, he was coming to visit us," said Arnau.

Ramón's eyebrows arched as high as a church transept. "I thought Guillem would be visiting family. You were expecting him?"

"Sí," said Arnau, "my wife is his cousin."

The woman looked away from them and into the fire.

"My wife regrets she didn't watch out for him," said Arnau, as if to explain her silence.

"By what route did you go to church, then, that you didn't happen to pass by your own front gate?"

"From my kennel, northwest of here. In the foothills. Spent last night there. Never came home," he said, darting a glance at his wife.

Ramón wished he could look closely at the mastiff's muzzle to search for blood, but it would be ungrateful for the hospitality of the *llar de foc* to imply his host or his host's beast was a killer. "Good woman," he said to Arnau's wife, "do you not wish to know how your cousin died?"

"The Lion of Judah," the woman said. She seemed sincere. Her husband must have told her this.

"He was not yet skillful enough to paint a beast that could come to life," said Ramón, "No, I fear he was mauled by a rabid mountain lynx or perhaps by a dog that escaped his master's leash. Don't you think that's what could have happened, Arnau?"

Arnau reached down and grabbed the jaws of the mastiff at his feet. "This dog? I think not." He pried the jaws open and showed

Ramón—the dog had no teeth. “I saw Guillem’s throat.”

“What of the young dogs you sold this morning? Did you have them all firmly in your control last night?”

“Sí,” he said. “Tied to stakes at my kennel. You’re wrong. My dogs and I are innocent of Guillem’s death, if that’s what you’re saying. And I’m willing to prove it. I believe as you do—no painted Lion of Judah killed the boy. Most likely a wolf. If we can track it, then perhaps the priests and townsfolk will calm down.”

Arnau’s proposal to use the toothless old hound to track the beast that killed Guillem was a good one. To keep Arnau honest, though, Ramón would have liked a friend of his own to join them—but one-footed Father Pau was out of the question and he had no other friends in the area. So he asked if the old farmer could accompany them; Arnau sent a servant to get him, and the three men set off behind the toothless mastiff to the spot where the old man had found Guillem.

Although its teeth were gone and its eyes were clouded with cataracts, the old dog still had a keen sense of smell. It quickly picked up a scent, sniffing the feet of the old farmer and his path to and from the site. Sensing this was of no interest to his master, the dog sniffed Ramón’s feet instead and promptly sneezed at the smell of lime dust and paint permeating the artist’s shoes. Then, the dog headed north along the path in the direction from which the old farmer had come.

Having no reason not to follow him, that’s what the three men did.

About a hundred yards along the path, the dog turned up into the hills. He led them across another vineyard. Ramón asked, “Whose vines are these?”

“Joán’s” said Arnau. “Joán de Comalda. My neighbor.”

They struggled over the rocky terrain, through a few cork oaks and a small stand of chestnuts, up and up into the foothills. Ramón itched to get his hands on Arnau’s walking staff—to examine it for bloodstains.

They had walked about as far as the Barcelona pier was long when the dog stopped. His ears and tail pricked up.

“What is it, Pep? What do you smell?” whispered Arnau.

The three men stood stock still and listened to the wind whistle through the gnarled trees’ barren limbs.

The dog growled.

A dozen feet in front of them, a wildcat crouched almost flat against the limestone ledge, ready to pounce down on them. It screeched and bristled, the fur on its neck ruffling out like a Minorcan rooster’s.

“The Lion of Judah!” shouted the old farmer.

Ramón felt the hackles on the back of his own neck rise. He would never again walk the roads of Catalunya alone.

The cat's yellow eyes grew wide and round, so wide Ramón could see a thin line of white around the pupils. In a flash he envisioned a fresco where the Lion of Sant Marco would crouch like that, ready to pounce upon nonbelievers.

But the old man's shout startled the animal. It must have thought better of attacking the mastiff—how could the wildcat know it had no teeth? It turned around, leaped over a boulder, and disappeared.

"Is that what killed Guillem?" asked the farmer.

"Surely it is," said Arnau. "We must bring an archer to hunt it down. We can't let a vicious animal like that run loose once it's tasted human blood."

But the dog was sniffing the ground again and pulling at its master's leash.

"You're awfully eager to pronounce our search ended. Even though your cur seems to have other plans," said Ramón, convinced he could never mistake the sandy hairs of a wildcat for the dark mastiff's hairs he had found in Guillem's wound and in the plaster.

"The cat's getting away," said Arnau. But he let his dog pull him onward, nonetheless.

As time passed, the wind picked up and began to whip their faces. Hoping the dog would soon find what he was looking for, they climbed higher through the foothills. All the while, Ramón kept the dog and his master in front of him, where he could see what the man was up to with his walking staff.

At last they reached a lookout from which they spotted an isolated *masia*. The old dog pulled at its leash and began to drag Arnau down the hill into the courtyard. Tethered just outside the door was another mastiff, this one bigger and blacker than its toothless sire.

"I sold that dog to Joan de Comalda," said Arnau, "a month ago."

The dog apparently was unused to visitors so far off the narrow mountain road. Its bark announced the men's arrival.

Instead of Joan de Comalda stepping out to greet them, out stepped his son, Ponç, Ramón's apprentice with the big feet and hands.

Ponç looked at Ramón for one heartbeat before he turned back inside his father's house.

Arnau turned to Ramón for some explanation. Ramón stared back at him, for once bereft of his all-knowing expression. And the old farmer stepped back from the snarling young mastiff tethered by the door.

When Ponç emerged this time he held a long butcher's knife. He grabbed the barking dog's tether in one hand and with the other cut the rope. "What is it you want here, Senyor Ramón? Am I to be expelled from your school for destroying Guillem's amateurish Lion of Judah?"

"You're the one who plastered over the lion?" asked Ramón. "Why? I gave you something to paint, too."

"That's right. A simple border that anyone could do as well. Did you know, when you assigned him the lion, Guillem told me he didn't want to paint it? I always wanted to paint the Beast with Seven Eyes. I've seen it in my dreams. I've practiced it a thousand times. Guillem would have been happy just to paint borders and clothing. He was insufferably stupid."

Ponç raised the butcher knife over his head. "I never wanted to paint anything else. Damn you to Hell!" He let go the dog's rope and hissed, "Sic him, Judah, sic!"

The dog leapt at Ramón. But Arnau's old mastiff still had some life in him. He plunged at his whelp, snarling as though he had a thousand fangs with which to fend off the younger dog.

Ponç turned and ran into the olive grove south of the *masia*.

While Arnau strove in vain to save his favorite old hunting dog from the jaws of the young attack mastiff, Ramón pursued Ponç.

The leafless trees afforded Ponç no place in which to hide, and rather than his salvation the grove proved his downfall. His awkward, adolescent feet caught in the olive trees' tangled roots, while Ramón's long, confident strides carried him over the obstacles with the grace of one of the angels he was so adept at depicting in paint.

As Ponç stumbled, not a dozen yards from the *masia*, Ramón reached out his long arm and caught the lad by his shoulder.

It was a short chase. Had he designed a series of paintings to commemorate the flight, pursuit, and capture, Ramón would have needed only a triptych—three small panels—not a whole cathedral wall.

Ramón was stunned when Ponç confessed to murder as easily as he'd confessed to vandalism. "It's not as if I actually killed him," he said. "The dog did that."

"You struck a savage blow to his head," said Ramón.

"Oh, that," said Ponç. "I only put him out of his misery. The gurgling sound his throat made was too much to tolerate."

When he heard how young Guillem had died, Father Pau crossed himself, then said, "Praise the Lord, Joachim the Heretic is wrong after all."

"So it would appear," said Ramón.

Ermessenda crossed herself as well. And at vespers Ramón saw her enter the confessional.

Ramón informed the Bishop of Barcelona in time to stop him from making a fool of himself before the Holy See over false rumors of the Apocalypse. His Excellency handed the artist another small bag of coins.

But the murdered apprentice's father had not been so well pleased with the outcome of events. He demanded Ponç's death.

Peering down at him from the dais at the trial, the judge told Ponç to confess. "Tell us how you did this. And why?"

"How?" asked Ponç, as if puzzled. "I simply waited for Guillem on the path to Arnau's that night and set the dog upon him." He gestured to the snarling, green-eyed mastiff tethered by the courtroom door. "Then all I had to do was cover over his painting and be sure to be there when Senyor Ramón needed someone to fill in the blank spot again." He looked at Ramón. "I was certain you would ask me to paint the missing beast—never that female."

Ramón had given back Ponç's apprentice fee, along with some of the bishop's coins, as soon as the young man was arrested. He assumed Joán de Comalda would need all the money he could scrape together as a bribe. A father would want the executioner to give his son a numbing drink of wormwood before he touched torch to woodpile.

But he watched the auto-da-fe from start to finish, unable to tear his eyes away from the youth's body wrapped in white-hot flames—so unlike those his favorite, Miquel, was wont to paint on church walls.

Better not to depict such things as we really see them, he thought.

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An Empire's Reach

Brendan DuBois



It was a warm Thursday morning in June in Quebec City when Turner noticed the blonde American woman watching him again, for the third day in a row.

He was set up on the Terrasse Dufferin, a wide wooden boardwalk just below the Château Frontenac, a hotel that looked like a castle that had been lifted from the Loire Valley in France

and brought to this high point of land in the city, brick by brick, tower by tower, stone by stone. The boardwalk held dozens of green park benches and overlooked the St. Lawrence River and the lower part of Quebec City. However, since Turner was working, his back was to the river and he was facing the Château with his sketch supplies. He was working on the one thousand twenty-



first (or maybe the one thousand twenty-second—he had once lost count) sketch of the famed hotel, which had seen such noble guests over the years as Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Queen Elizabeth II, and during one flush month, himself.

Turner sold his sketches to the passing tourists who thronged the Terrasse Dufferin most every day, except for the cold winter months when the wind coming up the icy St. Lawrence can cut one right to the bone. There were a lot of other artists at work in different parts of the city doing straight portrait work or caricatures, so when he first arrived here, he knew he had to set himself up differently. His gimmick—arrived at after lots of thinking and observing the other street artists—was that he did up the sketch of the Château, and then sketched in the customer, or the customer and her husband, or the customer and the entire family, walking in front of the historic building.

A nice gimmick, one that had given him a fairly comfortable career over the years. He enjoyed the give-and-take between himself and the customer, the dicker-ing, the exchange of money for the painting. He'd never thought he would be interested in being a businessman, but over the years here, he had found a taste for it—though, an unlikely career, no doubt about it.

But the blonde woman, whom Turner had noticed right away three days ago, didn't seem very interested in his career.

She was in her early thirties, slim, and on all three days she wore tight black slacks and comfortable walking shoes. Each day she had on a different colored sweater; today's was a light peach. She carried a small black leather knapsack on her back every day, and her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail. He would have taken her for any one of the many attractive women in Quebec City except that she was too intense-looking for the average Quebecois—which made her an American—and she wasn't as stylishly dressed.

Today he finished the first sketch of the morning—save for the space where he inserted a paying customer—and saw her again, sitting on the nearest park bench, leafing through a Fodor's guidebook and looking up at the Château, the six large cannon across the way, nearby Governor's Park, the tall monument to Wolfe and Montcalm in the park, and the rows of three-story buildings that rose up on St. Genevieve that held a number of bed and breakfasts as well as the American consulate. She continued staring up toward the park until Turner spotted her glancing again toward him, and he caught her eye.

It was hot for June in Quebec, and Turner swallowed some bottled water that he had purchased earlier from the tiny Bar Laitier, which carried ice cream, beverages, and fruit. He scratched at the back of his neck, where a thin souvenir chain rubbed against his



small ponytail. Time for a haircut pretty soon. Turner looked again at the woman and grinned and crooked a finger at her. Even at this distance, he could see her blush. She snapped shut the guidebook, accidentally dropped it on the boardwalk, picked it up, and put it in her knapsack. She then stood up and came over to him. He liked the way her legs moved in the slacks.

"Yes?" she asked, her voice quick, not at all sounding like someone who was on vacation.

"What can I do for you?" Turner asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that you've been coming here for three days in a row, checking me out, and I'm curious why you're doing that."

A faint smile crossed her face. "And you think I'm checking you out. Why's that? Maybe I'm just interested in your art."

"Two wrong answers," Turner said, enjoying the little give and take. "This isn't art. It's just my livelihood. I'm not good enough to be an artist."

The smile grew just a bit as she sat down next to him. "And what was my second wrong answer?"

"Everyone who comes by here and talks to me, they look at my work for a while to see what I'm doing," he said. "From the first day, you didn't care what I was drawing. It could have been Elvis emerging from the Mother Ship, up on the Plains of Abraham. No, young lady, you've kept your eye on me from moment one. And why are you doing that?"

"Because we need your help, Major Turner."

In his shock he almost knocked over his sketchpad. It had been years since anyone had said that to him, and he didn't like it.

Turner sat still for a couple of minutes, then took another swig of water. He found his mouth had gotten quite dry, and he took a couple of more swallows. "Congratulations," he said finally. "You've gotten my attention."

"So far, so good."

"Let's start with the obvious," Turner said. "Who are you, and who are the 'we' that you mentioned?"

She reached into her knapsack, handed him a business card, and then flipped open a slim leather wallet. It had her picture and an official seal and lots of signatures and other information. "Ann Morse," she said. "Department of Defense." She put the wallet back into her knapsack.

He rubbed at the raised seal on her business card, then returned it to her. "It says here you work for the Defense Research Agency."

"I do."

"Well, goody for you," Turner said. "Do they have a nice dental plan?"

"I have no complaints," she said.

"You stick around long enough with the Department of Defense, you'll find you'll have more complaints than you know what to do with."

Morse put her small knapsack on her lap. "You're a hard person to find, Major Turner."



"The fact that you've found me means it couldn't have been that difficult."

Her hands were still on the knapsack. "Still, it took a long time. Your pension check arrives here in Quebec City after going through four different mail drops and mail forwarding companies, one of which is in the British Virgin Islands, which wasn't very cooperative with our inquiries. The cost of all that mail forwarding must take a healthy portion out of your monthly check."

"Just a cost of doing business, of protecting my privacy," Turner said, looking intently at this pretty young woman. He wondered how she had been chosen to come talk to him. Drafted or volunteered? A familiar choice from his generation, a few decades ago.

He added, "Plus, the American dollar goes very far in Canada. I can do much better here than anywhere else. For a while I thought of going to Paris. You know why?"

"No, I do not," she said.

"Traditional dumping ground for American exiles after a war. Look at Hemingway, Dos Passos, Stein. All of them ended up there. But I spent a couple of months in Paris and decided to come to Quebec City. The food is better here and the waiters have a friendlier attitude. Which raises a question—what brings you to Quebec City, Mrs. Morse?"

"Ms. Morse," she corrected. "What brings me to Quebec City is you, Major Turner."

"Mr. Turner, if you please," he said. "Go on, I'm flattered."

She looked away for a moment as a juggler, wearing a rainbow-colored top hat that was about five feet tall, went by on a unicycle. "What brings me here is your service in Vietnam, Maj—excuse me, Mr. Turner. I need to talk to you about it."

"Go right ahead," he said, feeling something queasy begin to roll around in his insides. They're here, a voice inside started murmuring, they finally found out what happened.

"You served with an artillery unit. You served honorably. Yet when you left Vietnam and returned to the United States, you retired early, in 1976. You could have had a fulfilling career in the Army. Why did you leave?"

He looked over at his artist supplies, at the sketch of the Château Frontenac and the boardwalk. He picked up a pencil and went to work, filling in some of the background. "I tell you what, Ms. Morse. Do me a quick favor. Walk over to those large cannon over there, just beyond that little ice cream place. Look at those cannon and tell me what makes them unusual, then we'll talk. All right?"

Her face was expressionless, which Turner found fascinating. She was good. She was very good. She just nodded and picked up her knapsack and guidebook and walked over to the six cannon, each the size of a small telephone pole, set on metal carriages. A couple of kids were playing on top

of the large black barrels, riding astride them like carousel horses. He liked the way she walked, like the way the black slacks hugged her.

When she came back, she sat down at the exact same spot. "Very interesting. Those cannon were once used for the defense of Quebec City. Four of them are British in origin; they still have the arrow mark and the seal of Queen Victoria. The other two are from Imperial Russia, and they bear the double-headed eagle symbol of the czars. They were captured by the British during the Crimean War, and were later brought here as part of the city's defenses."

Morse paused, pulled back a free strand of blonde hair. "But you already knew that, Mr. Turner, didn't you? So what was the point of this little exercise?"

He pulled his pencil away from his sketching. "The point was to make sure you knew, Ms. Morse." He pointed to the six cannon with his pencil. "Don't you see it? British and Russian cannon, transported thousands of miles from Asia to defend territory in North America once controlled by the French. Three empires, clashing and coming together, here, on this little point of land. Empires have a very long reach, Ms. Morse. I can't think of a better example than these cannon, right here."

She kept on looking at him with those steady blue eyes. "And your tour in Vietnam. How does that connect with obsolete cannon, hundreds of years old?"

He smiled at her. "The reach of an empire, Ms. Morse. That was what was being displayed in Vietnam, now nearly four decades ago. The reach of an American empire, to come up against the reach of a Soviet empire, being fought over a place that was once controlled by the French empire. That's what was going on, the clash of empires. An old story, one that's still going on in other places of the world. Just like in Kosovo. Or East Timor. Or even Iraq. Which brings us back to my original question. Why are you and your people so interested in what an artillery officer did back then?"

She ignored the question, brought up one of her own. "And why are you so interested in empires, Mr. Turner?"

He sighed at all the old memories she was disturbing. "Because I find that all empires battle in public, while in private the businesses that support the empires are keeping an eager eye on developments. Because it all does come down to business. The trading companies that supported the French and British here in Canada. The transnationals that supported us in Iraq and Kosovo. Because I've seen what can happen when empires overextend their reach. You send men and materiel, thousands upon thousands of miles away from home, to implement plans and procedures that are drawn up in cool and safe meeting rooms in an office building. Plans and procedures developed by well-fed men



who had never heard a shot fired in anger, had never burrowed their heads in the ground when mortar rounds went whistling overhead or spent the night near the wire, with a weapon in hand, shaking with fear, wondering if that little snap of a twig meant a burrowing animal or a sapper squad about ten seconds away from slitting your throat."

Turner looked over at her and then back at his sketchpad. "No, nobody had any of those frontline experiences when they drew up their plans, their little maps and rules of engagement in Vietnam. And have you read their biographies now, their self-serving stories? They knew early on it was a waste of time, that the whole effort wouldn't work. But did they stop? Did they resign? Did they protest against their own president? No, no, and no. And tens of thousands of us and millions of them died because of their pride, or their honor, or whatever. All because they were far away and didn't know a thing. Look. You ever have any contract work done in your home? Like a new roof or deck?"

"Excuse me?" she asked, looking confused.

"C'mon, you heard the question. Ever have any contract work done on your house? Or condo? Or wherever the hell you live, Ms. Ann Morse of the Defense Research Agency?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Had new kitchen cabinets installed last year."

"Really? Tell me, did you keep a

close eye on the contractors? Was everything put in properly? Were there any problems?"

She shrugged her slim shoulders. "Oh, the usual. Missing parts. Days when the workers didn't show up. Another day when they drilled the wrong holes for the faucets on the sinks."

"Oh, I'm sure," Turner said. "Now imagine trying to do that same job from several thousand miles away, when the time zone is all different, when your noontime is their midnight, and you can only communicate by telephone or mail. How efficient a job would have happened? Not very efficient, right? Now, imagine trying to fight a war on those terms from so far away. Not like today, with the Internet and the satellite communications and all those high-tech goodies."

"Building a kitchen cabinet and conducting war can't be compared like that, Mr. Turner."

"Tough," Turner said. "I just did it. When the North finally overran the South in '75, you know what picture stuck in my mind the most?"

"Do tell me."

He wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not, but he still pressed on. "It was when the helicopters had left Saigon, carrying out the last of the Embassy staff and all of those desperate refugees. They then landed on aircraft carriers, out there in the China Sea, and when too many helicopters had landed on the flight deck, they ended up pushing the surplus helicopters into

the ocean. Can you believe that? Flying machines worth millions of dollars, dunked into the drink. Didn't make a hell of a lot of sense, did it? All of that equipment, all of those supplies, dumped over the side or left behind. Millions of dollars worth. Hell, I heard some of our stuff is still being used by the Vietnamese, decades later."

There, he thought. Enough bantering around. Let's see if she would take the bait.

And she certainly did.

Morse cleared her throat. "That's why I'm here to talk to you, Mr. Turner. About some equipment that was left behind. Equipment that you were responsible for. In a place called Depot Four."

He closed his eyes, listening to the thumping noise of people walking by on the boardwalk, almost drowned out by the humming from the traffic on the highway at his back, that ran parallel to the St. Lawrence River. For a sudden moment he felt warm, sweltering warm, as if he were back there, back in the jungles, where it rained for months at a time and mud sometimes reached up to your knees, and everything was damp and moldy and filled with mildew . . .

"Depot Four," Turner finally said. "What about Depot Four?"

"You were once one of the officers responsible for Depot Four," she said, her voice curiously flat. "You know what was contained in Depot Four. Mr. Turner, we have a problem. Some of the

items stored in Depot Four are still there almost thirty years later. And we need your help in getting them out."

Even though he had guessed long ago what had really happened back there, hearing the truth from this pretty young lady made his hands shake. He put down his brushes and clasped his hands.

"Depot Four . . ." he said. "We had lots of ammunition depots scattered throughout that poor country. Concrete bunkers stuck out in the middle of nowhere, some in secret locations, containing everything from 5.56 mm cartridges to rockets to artillery shells. Everything you needed in prosecuting an empire's war. And when an empire moves into battle, everything battle-related, no matter how unlikely you might need it, moves with it. Including . . . special weapons. Contained in Depot Four." He suddenly turned to her and raised his voice in anger. "How in hell did this happen, that those weapons were left behind? We're not talking about helicopters and gas tanks, are we? My God, you mean we actually left behind tactical nuclear weapons, battlefield nukes, in Vietnam?"

"It would appear that way," Morse said, looking right at him, her voice still calm. "The Department of Defense is one of the largest bureaucracies in the world, Mr. Turner. I don't believe I'm telling you anything new. Paperwork gets shuffled, overlooked. Orders are given and months later are still not ful-



filled. Certain items that should have been removed as part of our demobilization back then—like a number of 155 mm artillery shells with five kiloton warheads—were still there in 1975. When the North invaded, everyone was surprised at how quickly the South collapsed. A number of supplies, as you mentioned, were left behind, including those tactical nuclear weapons in Depot Four. Those responsible at the time managed to cover it up for a while by judicious shuffling of paperwork. It was only a few years ago that we learned the truth, that twenty of those artillery shells were still there in that bunker. Since then we've done some additional intelligence work. The bunker has been overgrown by jungle and remains undisturbed, and we can tell by remote-sensing that those warheads are still there."

The sense of warmth and humidity that had come to him earlier was gone. All he felt now was a cool breeze coming up from the river. He hunched forward some as a group of laughing tourists passed by, maps held high in their hands, looking for fun, looking for some adventure, looking for some damn thing.

Turner cleared his throat. "So why are you here, Ms. Morse?"

She leaned in closer. "For several months prior to 1975, you were one of the last supervisors of Depot Four."

"So what. Lots of guys supervised Depot Four. Why bother to contact me?"

"Because of how you gained access, Mr. Turner. Let me refresh your memory. To gain access to Depot Four, two officers, each with a separate key, had to approach an interior door. Both keys had to be used to open the door. One key was code named Alpha, the other, Omega. Today's security systems are fully computerized, and the key system you were familiar with has been destroyed, which left us with a problem. Since we've determined what was left behind in Depot Four, we have secured an Alpha key from a retired officer, such as yourself, who managed to hold onto a key as a souvenir when he left service. But an Omega key remains missing. We know that you were issued one of those keys as part of your responsibilities. The paperwork on whether you returned your Omega key is, shall we say, incomplete."

He stared up at the monument to Wolfe and Montcalm that commemorated the deaths of a British general and a French general in 1759, in a battle that destroyed a French empire and helped create a British one, and that didn't even last an afternoon, up there on the Plains of Abraham.

Turner said, "And when you get both keys, what then? A little tour group with a couple of trucks rolls up to an abandoned bunker and merrily drives away to Thailand with its booty?"

"No," she said, "not quite. A covert force would have to go in to remove the warheads, which is why we need the other key. With



the two keys in hand, a covert force could get in and out rather quickly. Without the key, they would need to blast their way in with explosives. And you know how those bunkers were designed, Mr. Turner. That would mean a lot of time, a lot of energy, and a lot of noise. None of which we can afford."

He rubbed his hands together. "Well, here's a thought for you, Ms. Morse. Why not the truth?"

He had a sense that he had shaken her up some. She sat back against the park bench, rubbed a hand against her ponytail. "Excuse me, Mr. Turner. What do you mean, the truth?"

Turner decided he liked seeing her confused. "Why not go to the Vietnamese, tell them the truth? Tell them what we did back then and ask permission to come in-country and remove the warheads. Perhaps pay a few million dollars in fees or fines or whatever. Wouldn't that work better than all that hi-tech Rambo stuff, sneaking in after dark with keys and guns blazing? Why not the truth?"

Morse paused for a moment. "Suppose we do that. And suppose they don't let us in?"

He shrugged. "The price you pay."

"Then you've just created another nuclear power in Southeast Asia," Morse said. "You know the problems and tensions between India and Pakistan. Does the region need another country with nuclear weapons? Does it?"

Turner suddenly laughed out

loud, infuriating Morse, who snapped, "Is there something funny I said back there? Is there?"

He wiped at his eyes, still smiling. "I'm sorry. I'm just laughing at the irony of it all. All the money, blood and treasure we spilled from the 1950's to the 1970's to prevent a Communist Vietnam from coming into being. And what happened? Not only does a Communist Vietnam exist, we actually helped arm it with the deadliest weapons on the planet. You have to admit, Ms. Morse, that's pretty funny, in a black way."

"I don't have to admit a thing," she said. "But I need to ask you, Mr. Turner. The Omega key. Do you have it?"

He said the carefully rehearsed words in a quiet tone. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"You're not answering the question."

He said, "What's the price, then?"

Her eyes narrowed. "A hundred thousand dollars."

"Try ten million," he said. "If I have it, of course."

Her face reddened. "That's outrageous."

"Let's see, we leave behind nuclear weapons in a country that we tried to bomb back to the Stone Age, and you call me outrageous. I'm many things, Ms. Morse, but I don't think I'm being particularly outrageous. And don't try to appeal to my patriotism next. It won't work. I'm a businessman now, pure and simple. All of those empires fought and continue to fight for one thing



and one thing only. Business. We fought in Iraq for oil. We fought in Kosovo to preserve stability in Europe so that our stock market wouldn't tumble. That's another reason why I left the Army. I decided it was better to be a businessman by myself than to be a sap fighting for one."

She slowly stood up, shaking her pretty head. "Is that it then? A businessman seeking ten million dollars?"

He looked up at her. "Why not? It sure would be nice to move to a bigger apartment. The one I'm living in now doesn't give out much heat, and you won't believe how cold it can get here in January. Plus, with money in the bank like that, I won't have to spend as much time out here, waiting for tourists to stop by."

"You could be brought back to the United States for justice."

"You'll find the Canadians still aren't that helpful when it comes to returning Vietnam vets who claim to be oppressed. And what would do if you got me back in the States? Torture me to locate the key? That's a stretch, even for you and your folks."

She handed over her business card, which he kept this time. "I'm afraid I'm out of time, Mr. Turner. If you ever decide to change your mind, our offer still remains. A hundred thousand dollars. That is, if you do have the key. If not, then we'll try something else."

He turned the card over and put it in his shirt pocket. "I'm sure you will. Good day, Ms. Morse."

"And to you, Mr. Turner."

Turner watched her walk down the boardwalk, until she disappeared in a mass of tourists standing around a large statue of Samuel de Champlain near the Château Frontenac. When he could not see her anymore, he picked up his brushes and pencils and went to work on the sketch before him. Within a half hour he was finished and he sat back to admire what he had done. In front of the Château he had sketched a pretty blonde woman in black slacks, with a knapsack slung across her back, walking away. Her face was obscured by her hair, but that didn't matter. He knew what she looked like, and that's what counted.

Later, when it was time for his lunch, he walked the several blocks to his apartment, a third-floor walk-up on rue Autueil. As he strolled along, he amused himself by noticing the people passing him by on the sidewalk, seeing how they were dressed and how they walked, and whispering to himself, "tourist, tourist, native, tourist . . ." He climbed the narrow stairs up to his apartment easily, having given up cigarettes years ago. When he unlocked the door and stepped inside, he paused for just a moment to take in his surroundings.

The apartment was a mess. Furniture had been rolled over, the coverings and cushions torn away. All of his books had been tossed in a heap, as well as a few framed sketches of his own. He



slowly walked through the apartment, seeing how the searchers had gone to work. Everything and anything he owned had been examined, torn open, and tossed asunder. His clothing was all in a pile as well, the seams ripped apart. Even the toothpaste had been squeezed out into his bathroom sink, along with the contents of a couple of shampoo bottles, and the meager collection of food and drink in the tiny refrigerator had also been dumped in the sink.

"Well," he said, going into the bedroom, where the bedding and mattress and box springs were upended in a corner. He sat down by the wrecked remains of his nightstand, drew his knees up to his chin, and smiled despite all that he saw about him.

A ruse, that was all. Ann Morse of the Defense Research Agency had come to him and conversed for long minutes, letting him vent and go on and on, while her compatriots were busy at work here, tearing the place apart. No wonder she hadn't interrupted him while he had ranted. No wonder. She only wanted to allow as much time as necessary so that this place could be searched, and when enough time had passed, she had brusquely dismissed him and had gone on her way. She hadn't been interested in a deal; she had only been interested in keeping him occupied during that time.

He reached over and picked up his satchel and removed the sketch of her walking in front of

the Château. He still had her business card, which gave a post office box address in Arlington, Virginia. Maybe he'd mail it to her someday. Maybe. But there were other things to do first, and right away.

From the mess of his bedroom he retrieved the telephone and a Bell Canada phone book. He put the phone in his lap and looked up two phone numbers, which he then carefully wrote down. The first phone number was for the American Consulate. And the second was for the Vietnamese Consulate.

Another smile. He reached under his ponytail and felt for the tiny chain, then bent his head forward, ducking some as the chain came free. A large key dangled from the end of the chain. He turned it over and examined it, just as he had examined it before, thousands of times. A simple brass key, with the Greek symbol for Omega in the center: Ω. Whaddya know. Back there in '75, before leaving the country, when papers were being burned and installations abandoned, he thought this would make a great souvenir, and he had certainly been right.

Once he had been a soldier, and now he was a businessman, and an old souvenir from his service was about to set him up in a sweet deal indeed.

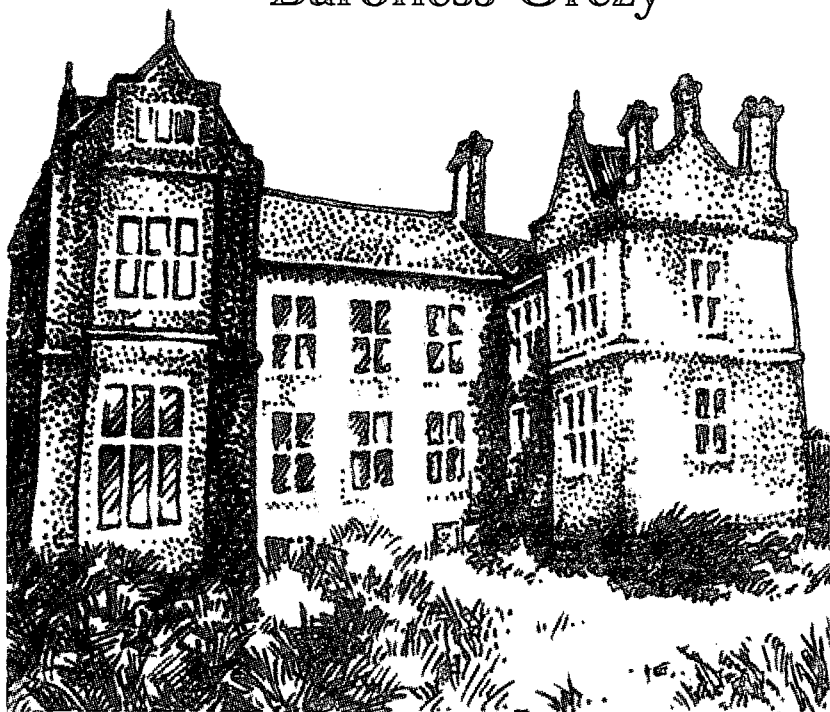
He picked up the phone, noted the two phone numbers, and started dialing.

"Let the bidding begin," Turner said. □

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE DUBLIN MYSTERY

Baroness Orczy



“I always thought that the history of that forged will was about as interesting as any I had read,” said the man in the corner that day. He had been silent for some time, and was meditatively sorting and looking through a packet of small photographs in his pocket book. Polly guessed that some of these would presently be placed before her for inspection—and she had not long to wait.

“That is old Brooks,” he said, pointing to one of the photographs, “Millionaire Brooks, as he was called, and these are his two sons, Percival and Murray. It was a curious case, wasn’t it? Personally I don’t wonder that the police were completely at sea. If a member of that highly estimable force happened to be as clever as the clever author of that forged will, we should have very few undetected crimes in this country.”

“That is why I always try to persuade you to give our poor ignorant police the benefit of your great insight and wisdom,” said Polly, with a smile.

“I know,” he said blandly, “you have been most kind in that way, but I am only an amateur. Crime interests me only when it resembles a clever game of chess, with many intricate moves which all tend to one solution, the checkmating of the antagonist—the detective forces of the country. Now, confess that, in the Dublin mystery, the clever police there were absolutely checkmated.”

“Absolutely.”

“Just as the public was. There were actually two crimes committed in one city which have completely baffled detection: the murder of Patrick Wethered the lawyer, and the forged will of Millionaire Brooks. There are not many millionaires in Ireland; no wonder old Brooks was a notability in his way, since his business—bacon curing, I believe it was—is said to be worth over £2,000,000 of solid money.

“His younger son, Murray, was a refined, highly educated man, and was, moreover, the apple of his father’s eye, as he was the spoilt darling of Dublin society; good-looking, a splendid dancer, and a perfect rider, he was the acknowledged ‘catch’ of the matrimonial market of Ireland, and many a very aristocratic house was opened hospitably to the favorite son of the millionaire.

“Of course, Percival Brooks, the eldest son, would inherit the bulk of the old man’s property and also probably the larger share in the business; he, too, was good-looking, more so than his brother; he, too, rode, danced, and talked well, but it was many years ago that mammas with marriageable daughters had given up all hopes of Percival Brooks as a probable son-in-law. That young man’s infatu-

ation for Maisie Fortescue, a lady of undoubted charm but very doubtful antecedents, who had astonished the London and Dublin music halls with her extravagant dances, was too well known and too old-established to encourage any hopes in other quarters.

"Whether Percival Brooks would ever marry Maisie Fortescue was thought to be very doubtful. Old Brooks had the full disposal of all his wealth, and it would have fared ill with Percival if he introduced an undesirable wife into the magnificent Fitzwilliam Place establishment.

"That is how matters stood," continued the man in the corner, "when Dublin society one morning learnt, with deep regret and dismay, that old Brooks had died very suddenly at his residence after only a few hours' illness. At first it was generally understood that he had had an apoplectic stroke; anyway, he had been at business hale and hearty as ever the day before his death, which occurred late on the evening of February 1st.

"It was the morning papers of February 2nd which told the sad news to their readers, and it was those selfsame papers which on that eventful morning contained another even more startling piece of news, that proved the prelude to a series of sensations such as tranquil, placid Dublin had not experienced for many years. This was, that on that afternoon which saw the death of Dublin's greatest millionaire, Mr. Patrick Wethered, his solicitor, was murdered in Phoenix Park at five o'clock in the afternoon while actually walking to his own house from his visit to his client in Fitzwilliam Place.

"Patrick Wethered was as well known as the proverbial town pump; his mysterious and tragic death filled all Dublin with dismay. The lawyer, who was a man sixty years of age, had been struck on the back of the head by a heavy stick, garrotted, and subsequently robbed, for neither money, watch, or pocket book were found upon his person, whilst the police soon gathered from Patrick Wethered's household that he had left home at two o'clock that afternoon, carrying both watch and pocket book, and undoubtedly money as well.

"An inquest was held, and a verdict of willful murder was found against some person or persons unknown.

"But Dublin had not exhausted its stock of sensations yet. Millionaire Brooks had been buried with due pomp and magnificence, and his will had been proved (his business and personalty being estimated at £2,500,000) by Percival Gordon Brooks, his eldest son and sole executor. The younger son, Murray, who had devoted the best years of his life to being a friend and companion to his father, while Percival ran after ballet dancers and music hall stars—Murray, who had avowedly been the apple of his father's eye in conse-

quence—was left with a miserable pittance of £300 a year, and no share whatever in the gigantic business of Brooks & Sons, bacon curers, of Dublin.

“Something had evidently happened within the precincts of the Brooks’s town mansion, which the public and Dublin society tried in vain to fathom. Elderly mammas and blushing *débutantes* were already thinking of the best means whereby next season they might more easily show the cold shoulder to young Murray Brooks, who had so suddenly become a hopeless ‘detrimental’ in the marriage market, when all these sensations terminated in one gigantic, overwhelming bit of scandal, which for the next three months furnished food for gossip in every drawing-room in Dublin.

“Mr. Murray Brooks, namely, had entered a claim for probate of a will, made by his father in 1891, declaring that the later will, made the very day of his father’s death and proved by his brother as sole executor, was null and void, that will being a forgery.

“The facts that transpired in connection with this extraordinary case were sufficiently mysterious to puzzle everybody. As I told you before, all Mr. Brooks’s friends never quite grasped the idea that the old man should so completely have cut off his favorite son with the proverbial shilling.

“You see, Percival had always been a thorn in the old man’s flesh. Horse racing, gambling, theaters, and music halls were, in the old pork butcher’s eyes, so many deadly sins which his son committed every day of his life, and all the Fitzwilliam Place household could testify to the many and bitter quarrels which had arisen between father and son over the latter’s gambling or racing debts. Many people asserted that Brooks would sooner have left his money to charitable institutions than seen it squandered upon the brightest stars that adorned the music hall stage.

“The case came up for hearing early in the autumn. In the meanwhile Percival Brooks had given up his race-course associates, settled down in the Fitzwilliam Place mansion, and conducted his father’s business, without a manager, but with all the energy and forethought which he had previously devoted to more unworthy causes.

“Murray had elected not to stay on in the old house; no doubt associations were of too painful and recent a nature; he was boarding with the family of a Mr. Wilson Hibbert, who was the late Patrick Wethered’s, the murdered lawyer’s, partner. They were quiet, homely people, who lived in a very pokey little house in Kilkenny Street, and poor Murray must, in spite of his grief, have felt very bitterly the change from his luxurious quarters in his father’s mansion to his present tiny room and homely meals.

"Percival Brooks, who was now drawing an income of over a hundred thousand a year, was very severely criticized for adhering so strictly to the letter of his father's will, and only paying his brother that paltry £300 a year, which was very literally but the crumbs off his own magnificent dinner table.

"The issue of that contested will case was therefore awaited with eager interest. In the meanwhile the police, who had at first seemed fairly loquacious on the subject of the murder of Mr. Patrick Wethered, suddenly became strangely reticent, and by their very reticence aroused a certain amount of uneasiness in the public mind, until one day the *Irish Times* published the following extraordinary, enigmatic paragraph:

We hear, on authority which cannot be questioned, that certain extraordinary developments are expected in connection with the brutal murder of our distinguished townsman Mr. Wethered; the police, in fact, are vainly trying to keep it secret that they hold a clew which is as important as it is sensational, and that they only await the impending issue of a well-known litigation in the probate court to effect an arrest.

"The Dublin public flocked to the court to hear the arguments in the great will case. There were Percival Brooks and Murray his brother, the two litigants, both good-looking and well-dressed, and both striving, by keeping up a running conversation with their lawyers, to appear unconcerned and confident of the issue. With Percival Brooks was Henry Oranmore, the eminent Irish K.C., whilst Walter Hibbert, a rising young barrister, the son of Wilson Hibbert, appeared for Murray.

"The will of which the latter claimed probate was one dated 1891, and had been made by Mr. Brooks during a severe illness which threatened to end his days. This will had been deposited in the hands of Messrs. Wethered and Hibbert, solicitors to the deceased, and by it Mr. Brooks left his business entirely to his youngest son, with a charge of £2000 a year upon it, payable to Percival. You see that Murray Brooks therefore had a very deep interest in that second will being found null and void.

"Old Mr. Hibbert had very ably instructed his son, and Walter Hibbert's opening speech was exceedingly clever. He would show, he said, on behalf of his client, that the will dated February 1st, 1908, could never have been made by the late Mr. Brooks, as it was absolutely contrary to his avowed intentions, and that if the late Mr. Brooks did on the day in question make any fresh will at all, it certainly was *not* the one proved by Mr. Percival Brooks, for that was

absolutely a forgery from beginning to end. Mr. Walter Hibbert proposed to call several witnesses in support of both these points.

"On the other hand, Mr. Henry Oranmore, K.C., very ably and courteously replied that he too had several witnesses to prove that Mr. Brooks certainly did make a will on the day in question, and that, whatever his intentions may have been in the past, he must have modified them on the day of his death, for the will proved by Mr. Percival Brooks was found after his death under his pillow, duly signed and witnessed and in every way legal.

"Then the battle began in sober earnest. There were a great many witnesses to be called on both sides, their evidence being of more or less importance—chiefly less. But the interest centered round the prosaic figure of John O'Neill, the butler of Fitzwilliam Place, who had been in Mr. Brooks's family for thirty years.

"I was clearing away my breakfast things," said John, "when I heard the master's voice in the study close by. Oh, my, he was that angry! I could hear the words "disgrace," and "villain," and "liar," and "ballet dancer," and one or two other ugly words as applied to some female lady, which I would not like to repeat. At first I did not take much notice, as I was quite used to hearing my poor dear master having words with Mr. Percival. So I went downstairs carrying my breakfast things; but I had just started cleaning my silver when the study bell goes ringing violently, and I hear Mr. Percival's voice shouting in the hall: "John! quick! Send for Dr. Mulligan at once. Your master is not well! Send one of the men, and you come up and help me to get Mr. Brooks to bed."

"I sent one of the grooms for the doctor," continued John, who seemed still affected at the recollection of his poor master, to whom he had evidently been very much attached, "and I went up to see Mr. Brooks. I found him lying on the study floor, his head supported in Mr. Percival's arms. "My father has fallen in a faint," said the young master; "help me to get him up to his room before Dr. Mulligan comes."

"Mr. Percival looked very white and upset, which was only natural; and when we had got my poor master to bed, I asked if I should not go and break the news to Mr. Murray, who had gone to business an hour ago. However, before Mr. Percival had time to give me an order the doctor came. I thought I had seen death plainly writ on my master's face, and when I showed the doctor out an hour later, and he told me that he would be back directly, I knew that the end was near.

"Mr. Brooks rang for me a minute or two later. He told me to send at once for Mr. Wethered, or else for Mr. Hibbert, if Mr. Wethered could not come. "I haven't many hours to live, John," he

says to me, "my heart is broke, the doctor says my heart is broke. A man shouldn't marry and have children, John, for they will sooner or later break his heart." I was so upset I couldn't speak; but I sent round at once for Mr. Wethered, who came himself just about three o'clock that afternoon.

"After he had been with my master about an hour I was called in, and Mr. Wethered said to me that Mr. Brooks wished me and one other of us servants to witness that he had signed a paper which was on a table by his bedside. I called Pat Mooney, the head footman, and before us both Mr. Brooks put his name at the bottom of that paper. Then Mr. Wethered gave me the pen and told me to write my name as a witness, and that Pat Mooney was to do the same. After that we were both told that we could go.'

"The old butler went on to explain that he was present in his late master's room on the following day when the undertakers, who had come to lay the dead man out, found a paper underneath his pillow. John O'Neill, who recognized the paper as the one to which he had appended his signature the day before, took it to Mr. Percival, and gave it into his hands.

"In answer to Mr. Walter Hibbert, John asserted positively that he took the paper from the undertaker's hand and went straight with it to Mr. Percival's room.

"He was alone,' said John; 'I gave him the paper. He just glanced at it, and I thought he looked rather astonished, but he said nothing, and I at once left the room.'

"When you say that you recognized the paper as the one which you had seen your master sign the day before, how did you actually recognize that it was the same paper?" asked Mr. Hibbert amidst breathless interest on the part of the spectators.

"It looked exactly the same paper to me, sir,' replied John, somewhat vaguely.

"Did you look at the contents, then?"

"No, sir; certainly not.'

"Had you done so the day before?"

"No, sir, only at my master's signature.'

"Then you only thought by the *outside* look of the paper that it was the same?"

"It looked the same thing, sir,' persisted John obstinately.

"You see," continued the man in the corner, leaning eagerly forward across the narrow marble table, "the contention of Murray Brooks's adviser was that Mr. Brooks, having made a will and hidden it—for some reason or other under his pillow—that will had fallen, through the means related by John O'Neill, into the hands of Mr. Percival Brooks, who had destroyed it and substituted a forged

one in its place, which adjudged the whole of Mr. Brooks's millions to himself. It was a terrible and daring accusation directed against a gentleman who, in spite of his many wild oats sowed in early youth, was a prominent and important figure in Irish high life.

"But John O'Neill had not finished his evidence, and Mr. Walter Hibbert had a bit of sensation still up his sleeve. He had, namely, produced a paper, the will proved by Mr. Percival Brooks, and had asked John O'Neill if once again he recognized the paper.

"'Certainly, sir,' said John unhesitatingly, 'that is the one the undertaker found under my poor master's pillow, and which I took to Mr. Percival's room immediately.'

"Then the paper was unfolded and placed before the witness.

"'Now, Mr. O'Neill, will you tell me if that is your signature?'

"John looked at it for a moment; then he said: 'Excuse me, sir,' and produced a pair of spectacles which he carefully adjusted before he again examined the paper. Then he thoughtfully shook his head.

"'It don't look much like my writing, sir,' he said at last. 'That is to say,' he added, by way of elucidating the matter, 'it does look like my writing, but then I don't think it is.'

"The learned counsel," continued the old man in the corner, "went on arguing, speechifying, cross-examining for nearly a week, until they arrived at the one conclusion which was inevitable from the very first, namely, that the will *was* a forgery—a gross, clumsy, idiotic forgery, since both John O'Neill and Pat Mooney, the two witnesses, absolutely repudiated the signatures as their own. The only successful bit of calligraphy the forger had done was the signature of old Mr. Brooks.

"It was a very curious fact, and one which had undoubtedly aided the forger in accomplishing his work quickly, that Mr. Wethered the lawyer, having, no doubt, realized that Mr. Brooks had not many moments in life to spare, had not drawn up the usual engrossed, magnificent document dear to the lawyer heart, but had used for his client's will one of those regular printed forms which can be purchased at any stationer's.

"Mr. Percival Brooks, of course, flatly denied the serious allegation brought against him. He admitted that the butler had brought him the document the morning after his father's death, and that he certainly, on glancing at it, had been very much astonished to see that the document was his father's will. Against that he declared that its contents did not astonish him in the slightest degree, that he himself knew of the testator's intentions, but that he certainly thought his father had entrusted the will to the care of Mr. Wethered, who did all his business for him.

"'I only very cursorily glanced at the signature,' he concluded,

speaking in a perfectly calm, clear voice; 'you must understand that the thought of forgery was very far from my mind, and that my father's signature is exceedingly well imitated, if, indeed, it is not his own, which I am not at all prepared to believe. As for the two witnesses' signatures, I don't think I had ever seen them before. I took the document to Messrs. Barkston and Maud, who had often done business for me before, and they assured me that the will was in perfect form and order.'

"Asked why he had not entrusted the will to his father's solicitors, he replied:

"For the very simple reason that exactly half an hour before the will was placed in my hands, I had read that Mr. Patrick Wethered had been murdered the night before. Mr. Hibbert, the junior partner, was not personally known to me.'

"After that, for form's sake, a good deal of expert evidence was heard on the subject of the dead man's signature. But that was quite unanimous, and merely went to corroborate what had already been established beyond a doubt, namely, that the will dated February 1st, 1908, was a forgery, and probate of the will dated 1891 was therefore granted to Mr. Murray Brooks, the sole executor mentioned therein.

"Two days later the police applied for a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Percival Brooks on a charge of forgery.

"The Crown prosecuted, and Mr. Brooks had again the support of Mr. Oranmore, the eminent K.C. Perfectly calm, like a man conscious of his own innocence and unable to grasp the idea that justice does sometimes miscarry, Mr. Brooks, the son of the millionaire, himself still the possessor of a very large fortune under the former will, stood up in the dock on that memorable day in October, 1908, which still no doubt lives in the memory of his many friends.

"All the evidence with regard to Mr. Brooks's last moments and the forged will was gone through over again. That will, it was the contention of the Crown, had been forged so entirely in favor of the accused, cutting out everyone else, that obviously no one but the beneficiary under that false will would have had any motive in forging it.

"Very pale, and with a frown between his deep-set, handsome Irish eyes, Percival Brooks listened to this large volume of evidence piled up against him by the Crown.

"At times he held brief consultations with Mr. Oranmore, who seemed as cool as a cucumber. Have you ever seen Oranmore in court? He is a character worthy of Dickens. His pronounced brogue, his fat, podgy, clean-shaven face, his not always immaculately clean large hands, have often delighted the caricaturist. As it very soon

transpired during that memorable magisterial inquiry, he relied for a verdict in favor of his client upon two main points, and he had concentrated all his skill upon making these two points as telling as he possibly could.

"The first point was the question of time. John O'Neill, cross-examined by Oranmore, stated without hesitation that he had given the will to Mr. Percival at eleven o'clock in the morning. And now the eminent K.C. brought forward and placed in the witness box the very lawyers whose hands the accused had then immediately placed the will. Now, Mr. Barkston, a very well-known solicitor of King Street, declared positively that Mr. Percival Brooks was in his office at a quarter before twelve; two of his clerks testified to the same time exactly, and it was *impossible*, contended Mr. Oranmore, that within three-quarters of an hour Mr. Brooks could have gone to a stationer's, bought a will form, copied Mr. Wethered's writing, his father's signature, and that of John O'Neill and Pat Mooney.

"Such a thing might have been planned, arranged, practiced, and ultimately, after a great deal of trouble, successfully carried out, but human intelligence could not grasp the other as a possibility.

"Still the judge wavered. The eminent K.C. had shaken but not shattered his belief in the prisoner's guilt. But there was one point more, and this Oranmore, with the skill of a dramatist, had reserved for the fall of the curtain.

"He noted every sign in the judge's face, he guessed that his client was not yet absolutely safe; then only did he produce his last two witnesses.

"One of them was Mary Sullivan, one of the housemaids in the Fitzwilliam mansion. She had been sent up by the cook at a quarter past four o'clock on the afternoon of February 1st with some hot water, which the nurse had ordered, for the master's room. Just as she was about to knock at the door Mr. Wethered was coming out of the room. Mary stopped with the tray in her hand, and at the door Mr. Wethered turned and said quite loudly: 'Now, don't fret, don't be anxious; do try and be calm. Your will is safe in my pocket, nothing can change it or alter one word of it but yourself.'

"It was, of course, a very ticklish point in law whether the housemaid's evidence could be accepted. You see, she was quoting the words of a man since dead, spoken to another man also dead. There is no doubt that had there been very strong evidence on the other side against Percival Brooks, Mary Sullivan's would have counted for nothing; but, as I told you before, the judge's belief in the prisoner's guilt was already very seriously shaken, and now the final blow aimed at it by Mr. Oranmore shattered his last lingering doubts.

"Dr. Mulligan, namely, had been placed by Mr. Oranmore into the witness box. He was a medical man of unimpeachable authority, in fact, absolutely at the head of his profession in Dublin. What he said practically corroborated Mary Sullivan's testimony. He had gone in to see Mr. Brooks at half-past four, and understood from him that his lawyer had just left him.

"Mr. Brooks certainly, though terribly weak, was calm and more composed. He was dying from a sudden heart attack, and Dr. Mulligan foresaw the almost immediate end. But he was still conscious and managed to murmur feebly: 'I feel much easier in my mind now, Doctor—I have made my will—Wethered has been—he's got it in his pocket—it is safe there—safe from that—' But the words died on his lips, and after that he spoke but little. He saw his two sons before he died, but hardly knew them or even looked at them.

"You see," concluded the man in the corner, "you see that the prosecution was bound to collapse. Oranmore did not give it a leg to stand on. The will was forged, it is true, forged in the favor of Percival Brooks and of no one else, forged for him and for his benefit. Whether he knew and connived at the forgery was never proved or, as far as I know, even hinted, but it was impossible to go against all the evidence, which pointed that, as far as the act itself was concerned, he at least was innocent. You see, Dr. Mulligan's evidence was not to be shaken. Mary Sullivan's was equally strong.

"There were two witnesses swearing positively that old Brooks's will was in Mr. Wethered's keeping when that gentleman left the Fitzwilliam mansion at a quarter past four. At five o'clock in the afternoon the lawyer was found dead in Phoenix Park. Between a quarter past four and eight o'clock in the evening Percival Brooks never left the house—that was subsequently proved by Oranmore up to the hilt and beyond a doubt. Since the will found under old Brooks's pillow was a forged will, where then was the will he did make, and which Wethered carried away with him in his pocket?"

"Stolen, of course," said Polly, "by those who murdered and robbed him; it may have been of no value to them, but they naturally would destroy it, lest it might prove a clew against them."

"Then you think it was mere coincidence?" he asked excitedly.

"What?"

"That Wethered was murdered and robbed at the very moment that he carried the will in his pocket, whilst another was being forged in its place?"

"It certainly would be very curious, if it *were* a coincidence," she said musingly.

"Very," he repeated with biting sarcasm, whilst nervously his bony fingers played with the inevitable bit of string. "Very curious

indeed. Just think of the whole thing. There was the old man with all his wealth, and two sons, one to whom he is devoted, and the other with whom he does nothing but quarrel. One day there is another of these quarrels, but more violent, more terrible than any that have previously occurred, with the result that the father, heart-broken by it all, has an attack of apoplexy and practically dies of a broken heart. After that he alters his will, and subsequently a will is proved which turns out to be a forgery.

"Now everybody—police, press, and public alike—at once jump to the conclusion that, as Percival Brooks benefits by that forged will, Percival Brooks must be the forger."

"Seek for him whom the crime benefits, is your own axiom," argued the girl.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Percival Brooks benefited to the tune of £2,000,000."

"I beg your pardon. He did nothing of the sort. He was left with less than half the share that his younger brother inherited."

"Now, yes; but that was a former will and—"

"And that forged will was so clumsily executed, the signature so carelessly imitated, that the forgery was bound to come to light. Did *that* never strike you?"

"Yes, but—"

"There is no but," he interrupted. "It was all as clear as daylight to me from the very first. The quarrel with the old man, which broke his heart, was not with the eldest son, with whom he was used to quarreling, but with the second son whom he idolized, in whom he believed. Don't you remember how John O'Neill heard the words 'liar' and 'deceit'? Percival Brooks had never deceived his father. His sins were all on the surface. Murray had led a quiet life, had pandered to his father, and fawned upon him, until, like most hypocrites, he at last got found out. Who knows what ugly gambling debt or debt of honor, suddenly revealed to old Brooks, was the cause of that last and deadly quarrel?"

"You remember that it was Percival who remained beside his father and carried him up to his room. Where was Murray throughout that long and painful day, when his father lay dying—he, the idolized son, the apple of the old man's eye? You never hear his name mentioned as being present there all that day. But he knew that he had offended his father mortally, and that his father meant to cut him off with a shilling. He knew that Mr. Wethered had been sent for, that Wethered left the house soon after four o'clock.

"And here the cleverness of the man comes in. Having lain in wait for Wethered and knocked him on the back of the head with a stick, he could not very well make that will disappear altogether. There

remained the faint chance of some other witnesses knowing that Mr. Brooks had made a fresh will, Mr. Wethered's partner, his clerk, or one of the confidential servants in the house. Therefore *a* will must be discovered after the old man's death.

"Now, Murray Brooks was not an expert forger; it takes years of training to become that. A forged will executed by himself would be sure to be found out—yes, that's it, sure to be found out. The forgery will be palpable—let it be palpable, and then it will be found out, branded as such, and the original will of 1891, so favorable to the young blackguard's interests, would be held as valid. Was it devilry or merely additional caution which prompted Murray to pen that forged will so glaringly in Percival's favor? It is impossible to say.

"Anyhow, it was the cleverest touch in that marvelously devised crime. To plan that evil deed was great, to execute it was easy enough. He had several hours' leisure in which to do it. Then at night it was simplicity itself to slip the document under the dead man's pillow. Sacrilege causes no shudder to such natures as Murray Brooks's. The rest of the drama you know already—"

"But Percival Brooks?"

"The jury returned a verdict of 'Not guilty.' There was no evidence against him."

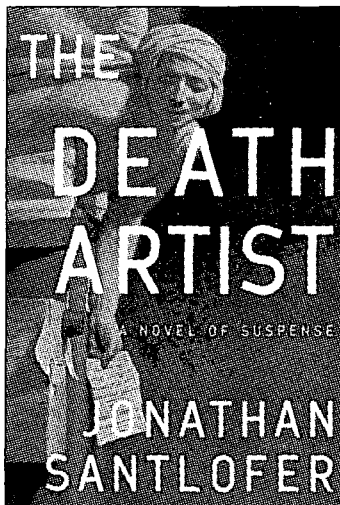
"But the money? Surely the scoundrel does not have the enjoyment of it still?"

"No; he enjoyed it for a time, but he died about three months ago, and forgot to take the precaution of making a will, so his brother Percival has got the business after all. If you ever go to Dublin, I should order some of Brooks's bacon if I were you. It is very good."

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon

Move over, Clarice Starling. Kate McKinnon Rothstein, Jonathan Santlofer's protagonist in **The Death Artist** (Morrow, \$24.95), is now on the scene—New York's art scene as well as the scene of the grisly crimes perpetrated by a serial killer. This former cop is now happily married to one of the city's wealthiest men and has a Ph.D. in art history and her own TV series (not to mention striking good looks). Yet Rothstein is also a loyal friend to her old college chum (and FBI agent) Liz, and she carries with her the ever-present sadness of a woman who is unable to bear children of her own. When the novel opens, we see her grieving for the gifted young musician she mentored—who, it turns out, is the Death Artist's latest victim. Soon, she too is pulled into the killer's net when he starts sending her cryptic messages. There's more here for Thomas Harris fans, too: the serial killer is brilliant, ruthless, and fearless; the crimes are ghoulish; and the chase for the killer is exciting. This one's not for the squeamish, but if you're a thriller lover with a staunch heart, this book has got your name on it.



Leslie Glass brings back her NYPD detective, April Woo, in **The Silent Bride** (Onyx, \$6.99). When an Orthodox Jewish woman is killed by a sniper's bullet as she walks down the aisle to meet her groom, April and Lieutenant Mike Sanchez, her partner (and lover), are called in and assigned to a squad investigating terrorist links to the crime. All too soon, another bride is murdered—this time at St. Patrick's Cathedral—and now the clock starts ticking to find a common element that links these women to a deadly stalker. To further up the ante for April, her best friend's wedding day is coming up very soon. Glass has the police procedure down pat and the tension turned up to high. Best of all, however, is walking around in Woo's Chinese-American shoes, a fascinating, albeit uncomfortable, experience.

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won by R. Stewart of Walnut Creek, California. Honorable Mentions go to Robert T. Lawton of Rapid City, South Dakota; Frances Lowe of Orlando, Florida; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Thom Johnston of San



Francisco, California; Debra Ann Fiorini of Scranton, Pennsylvania; Thomas H. Beaven of Garden City, Michigan; Martha Bland of Midland, Texas; Peter Huston of Schenectady, New York; Susan R. O'Neal of Norfolk, Virginia; and J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas.

Hulton Archive

RANDOM ENCOUNTER by R. Stewart

The light changes, Billie starts her scooter, and this guy vaults onto the tandem seat! Something steely jabs her side. "Take me to the Old River Bridge, baby," he snaps, "then I won't have to shoot!"

"But, mister—"

"Drive, doll!" He goes on to say he's just pulled a robbery, comes out, his bike's gone! "My camper's down by the bridge. Hurry!"

They get to the bridge. Billie sees the camper under the trees, shivers. The guy grabs her arm, says, "C'mon." She's got to think of something! The guy looks down and she has it!

"Hey, baby," he says, "what's that on your left ankle?"

"An electronic gizmo," she blurts. "I was a bookkeeper, and, you know . . . no jail time, just town arrest. If I stray too far, though, they come looking!"

Then they hear the siren, see the squad car barreling toward them. "See, mister?" says Billie, incredulously.

The cruiser skids to a halt, the guy takes off running, two cops go after him. Soon they're back, the guy manacled, put in the squad car.

One cop turns to Billie. "You okay, miss?" She nods. Lucky somebody saw the guy hijack you and called in," he tells her. Then: "What's that on your ankle?"

"Oh, that!" Billie says. "It's a magnetic cuff to cure my ankle pain. New Age stuff! Just had it put on!"

"Does it work?" asks the cop, skeptically.

"Well," replies Billie, "so far it's worked wonders!"

(continued from page 140)

On an entirely different note is Philip Davison's **The Crooked Man** (Penguin, \$13), a surprisingly compelling tale about a low-level freelancer for Britain's MI5 and how an unpredictable sequence of events leads to an eye-opening conclusion. Quietly and undramatically, protagonist Harry Fielding attaches himself to the reader's sympathies. Is it his admittedly low self-esteem that demands attention, or perhaps the compassion he has for a lonely, elderly neighbor? Whatever the reason, we duly follow Harry as he heads out on his assignment with his camera. We're with him as he photographs a highly placed government official fatally striking his young mistress. Our shoulders knot as we watch Harry get involved with the sister of another tenant in his building, a woman imprisoned for the murder of her abusive brother-in-law. And as Harry's formerly drab and simple life becomes more and more complicated—primarily by the actions of those around him—we witness the transformation of an innately passive man into someone else entirely. Fans of Ruth Rendell's psychological novels should also appreciate this one.

If you've been reading Kay Hooper's thrillers from the past several years, you're already familiar with her FBI agent and profiler, Noah Bishop, and his special hand-picked team of psychics. Hooper's series features different protagonists as individual team members step forward to take the central roles. Hooper's latest, **Whisper of Evil** (Bantam, \$7.50), brings Nell Gallagher to the forefront when she returns home to the small town of Silence. She hasn't been back since she abruptly ran away at age eighteen, but no one is particularly surprised to see her return to settle her father's estate. It is surely coincidence that the townspeople of Silence are running scared. Four men have died in what initially appeared to be accidents but have now been ruled homicides. Gallagher must cope with the secrets from her own past as they are gradually revealed to her, while also struggling with feelings she had as a teenager for a local boy who has definitely grown up. In Hooper's novels, her protagonists' willingness to employ their gifts in the cause of justice often puts them in the eye of a storm. In Nell's case, it brings her knowledge of her own family's past and reveals secrets that may prove deadly. If you like the idea of a psychic thriller with a dash of romance and not a little suspense, then Hooper's definitely the author for you.

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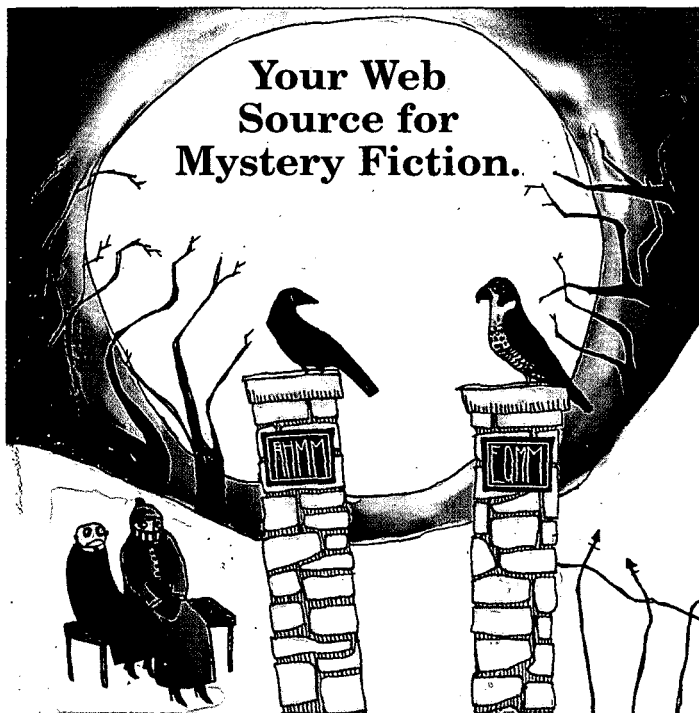
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